

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By: Sinnatious

When Ryoma finds himself in a tough situation, his pride might keep him swimming, but it's Tezuka who keeps his head above water.

Status: complete

Published: 2008-04-23

Updated: 2008-05-08

Words: 83152

Chapters: 28

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Angst/Hurt/Comfort - Characters: E. Ryoma, Tezuka K. - Reviews: 406 - Favs: 1,198 - Follows: 316

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4214420/1/The-Dispossession-of-Echizen-Ryoma>

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I do not own Prince of Tennis, nor am I profiting from it any way. This fiction was written purely for enjoyment.

Warning: This fiction contains shonen-ai. If you don't know what that term means, you probably don't want to read this fic. If you do know what it means and are offended by it, please don't read, and please don't flame me for something you were warned about. It also contains child neglect, and some swearing.

Summary: When Ryoma finds himself in a tough situation, his pride might keep him swimming, but it's Tezuka who keeps his head above water.

Author's Note: Another finished fic that I'm archiving on FFnet. I'm not really proud of this fic - it has become something of a shrine to all my bad writing habits - but hopefully some people will derive some enjoyment out of it and maybe get a bit of discussion going. Special thanks goes to pillarpair for the beta. The first half is predominantly Ryoma's POV, the second half predominantly Tezuka's. There are lots of TezRyo elements (as I have discovered is almost inevitable when I write in this fandom), but it's not the main focus. Right, that should be everything you need to know before reading. :)

I'll probably throw up a few chapters a day, as there are 28 of them and that's a bit too much to upload all at once.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 1

When Ryoma Echizen opened his eyes to the incessant beeping of his alarm clock that Tuesday morning, he couldn't help but feel as

though something important was supposed to happen that day. The feeling was strong enough to rouse him from his drowsy state as he mentally ran through any out-of-the-ordinary commitments he may have made. With the Nationals finally over there weren't any tournaments for a while, nor were there any special club activities - with the onset of Autumn, all tennis activities had died down, though the club's regular practice routines and meetings would likely continue until Winter set in. No promises to meet up with anyone, no exams.... After running through the list of possibilities, he dismissed the notion as paranoia while stroking his cat's soft fur absent-mindedly. Karupin purred contentedly from where he lay, curled up against his side.

Golden-brown eyes wandered back towards the alarm clock. For once he hadn't overslept, but if he didn't get moving he'd be late anyway. Groaning, Ryoma threw back the covers and shuffled out of bed, rubbing the sleep away from his eyes as he went through the motions of a morning routine.

When the freshman finally wandered into the kitchen, his father was already up and reading the newspaper, and his mother was serving him breakfast.

"Ryoma, good morning, I trust you slept well?" Echizen Rinko asked cheerily.

"Hn, where's Nanako?" Ryoma asked, looking at his American-style breakfast disdainfully. It was almost weird for his mother to be around during breakfast instead of his cousin. With Nanako around, she'd felt less obliged to make every meal and tended to work a lot more overtime, meaning that she could sometimes go for days without seeing her family.

"Your cousin's going to be out of town for the next few weeks - she's gone back to visit your aunt and uncle in the country. Didn't she tell you?"

Frowning, Ryoma tried to remember if Nanako had said anything about that over the past few days. Come to think of it, he thought he remembered her saying something about a trip several days ago, but he'd slept in for most of the week so tended to blaze through the kitchen, pausing only long enough only to gulp a glass of milk before running to morning practice. "What about her classes?"

His mother shrugged. "Her classes run on a slightly different schedule at the moment. I think she's only missing a couple."

"Ha! She probably just finally met a nice boy, and they've run off to elope for all you know!" Nanjiroh exclaimed as turned to the next page of the paper. "My darling Nanako - all grown up!"

"Stupid old man," Ryoma muttered.

"Brat."

Ignoring both of them, his mother continued, "She did want to say goodbye to you yesterday before she left, but you ran out of the house before she had the chance, and you didn't get back until so late." It went unspoken that when he finally did arrive home, he'd spent so much time bickering with his father that he only noticed his cousin's absence now.

"Che." Such formalities didn't really bother Ryoma. It wasn't like his cousin was leaving forever. There was no need to get sappy over it. If anything, the only thing it meant was that he wasn't likely to get a proper Japanese-style breakfast for a few weeks. Ah well, he'd have to suffer through his mother's cooking - which admittedly wasn't that bad, but after eating some of Nanako's dishes, he had to admit his mother could be a trifle lazy when it came to domestic affairs. He proceeded to speedily shovel down most of his breakfast in about two minutes.

"Eat slower or you'll choke, kid."

Ryoma's mouth was full, so he didn't reply, but did spare his father a glare - it was well known that when hungry enough, Nanjiroh Echizen fairly resembled a pig at the table.

"So uncute," he muttered, returning his full attention to his paper. Again, Ryoma ignored him as he gulped down a second glass of milk, wiped his mouth with a napkin and prepared to leave. If it wasn't for tennis, he often thought his father would have been much happier with a daughter.

"I'm leaving," he called out, grabbing his bag and stopping by the door to tie his shoes.

"Take care! Have a good day at school!" his mother's voice floated after him, though she sounded distracted by whatever it was she was doing in the kitchen. Ryoma shrugged. He supposed he had become used to Nanako hovering over him as he left the house after all. Was it weird that he got a more motherly vibe from his cousin than his own mother? Probably, but then, a lot had changed since they'd started living in Japan. America seemed like a lifetime ago now - he wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to go back to living there full-time again. He'd never experienced homesickness until he'd gone to the American Open.

After a brief check to make sure his bag had everything, he headed out onto the footpath, for once able to walk at a sedate pace towards school. It would be nice not to turn up to morning practice already puffed for once - not that a mad dash to school was enough to wear him out.

A ringing bicycle bell alerted him to Momoshiro's presence a couple of blocks later. "Oiiii! Echizen!" The junior called out, slowing his bike down. "Want a ride?"

Wordlessly the freshman took a few running steps and hopped onto the back of the bike, grasping the junior's shoulders as he stood half-upright, having perfected the manoeuvre over the past few months of hitching rides with the other regular. Once the first-year was safely

on, the tall, spiky-haired junior started pedalling faster, speeding them towards school. For once, they might even be early for morning practice. Oishi would probably have a heart attack.

"How did you go in yesterday's match against Eiji-senpai, Echizen?" Momoshiro called out, the wind whipping the words away from his mouth. "I didn't get to see it!"

"That's because Arai-senpai got you into a tie-break, didn't he? You're slacking, Momo-senpai," Echizen chided with a smirk on his face.

"I just had an off day!" The second year protested, bike swerving slightly as he half-turned to argue with the freshman.

"Hn... Kikumar-senpai's match was boring. He used up all of his stamina on the matches before ours."

"Harsh as always," Momoshiro muttered.

The rest of the ride was filled mostly with the junior complaining about Kaidoh and talking about Tachibana's little sister, to which Ryoma would only contribute vague comments when directly asked for his opinion, having heard all of this information several times before in a slightly different fashion. It was mere minutes later that they arrived at the school tennis courts, with the freshman heading towards the locker room to change while Momoshiro locked up his bike.

Morning practice was mostly just lights drills. With the Nationals behind them, autumn underway and no team tournaments to look forward to until spring, the focus had shifted from the regular's training into improving the games of the freshmen and juniors. Ryoma personally found it dull and boring, as a good part of that training regime meant either running drills or playing the juniors, who were, quite frankly, no challenge for him. The trials of the Nationals felt like a distant memory. Even when trying to keep things interesting by only playing with his right hand - by now most of the

club had dealt with the fact that one of their best players was a first-year - none of them had managed to get a game from him, and his service game had turned into a series of no-touch aces. It almost didn't seem worth warming up.

Classes were tediously boring as usual - Ryoma had long caught up with all of his subjects, and only really paid any modicum of attention to stay alert for something he might have missed or in case the teacher called him on something.

Afternoon practice, at least, was more interesting, if 'interesting' meant horrifying. Inui had broken out the juice, which the regulars had barely avoided. Non-regulars had been spared the risk, as Ryuuzaki-sensei had insisted that the juniors had to get on with their matches and that wasn't possible if half of them had stomachaches.

Ryoma was stuck playing one of Arai's buddies whose name he couldn't remember, and was still thoroughly bored, even playing with his right hand. He'd gone so far as to add extra weights to his wrists and ankles, in hopes it might make the match at least a little more challenging.

On the court to his left, there appeared to be some kaffuffle with Kikumarū and Momoshiro - it seemed the freshman wasn't the only one who'd become bored out of his skull playing the juniors. The two were having a doubles match against Arai and one of the better juniors, who were actually doing surprisingly well - if only because Arai had found some minor flaw in their combination, but it was working better than it should have as the two became flustered by the unexpected difficulty they'd encountered, exacerbating what should have been a minor problem to a major one as they squabbled.

On the court to his right, Fuji was apparently getting his kicks out of teasing a flustered Oishi on the opposing team, who was coaching Kachirou, leaving the prodigy to coach Horio; Katsuo being out sick that day. The vice-captain was getting irritated, he could tell, that Fuji seemed intent on not taking the training seriously, and the two

freshmen were starting to mess up their plays as the unnatural tenseness between the two most amicable members of the team escalated. There was shouting another court down, which sounded rather like Kaidoh demanding that Momoshiro shut up, and on the fifth court where the rest of the club members were doing drills it seemed as though someone had knocked over a basket of balls.

Ryoma couldn't blame his senpai for being bored. Still, Coach Ryuuzaki had left early, leaving Tezuka in charge of what looked like a sinking ship as bored regulars created an array of minor disturbances that the other club members inevitably escalated. Chaos was the most efficient description of that afternoon's practice. He could see the captain stalking from court to court out of corner of his eyes, eyebrows drawn tighter and tighter together as the noise level of the chatter started to drown out the thud of tennis balls.

The freshman served another ace, no longer really paying attention to his match as the racket from the next court grew too loud to ignore. It appeared that Momoshiro and Kikumaru had worked out their differences and won their match 6-4, but were now getting a little too enthusiastic in their celebrations.

"Mou, can't catch me, Momo!" the energetic red head declared, bouncing around the court.

Grinning, the power player grabbed an open jug of a sickly purple liquid. "Hey senpai! Catch THIS!" He lobbed the vile concoction directly at his energetic teammate.

Kikumaru scream and tried to duck the incoming projectile, but that proved to be futile as the jug flew open and Inui's latest juice sprayed all over his face - and incidentally, all over the court as well. "ACK! GET IT OFF, GET IT OFF! MOMO, I'M GONNA KILL YOU!"

Momoshiro's raucous laughter was cut short by a booming voice. "EVERYONE! TWO HUNDRED LAPS, NOW!"

Tezuka had finally snapped.

Silence immediately descended, and a guilty-looking Momoshiro and juice-covered Kikumaru practically sprinted for the court gates, while the rest of the club hurried to set aside their equipment and follow suit. The captain meant business. Two hundred laps was an insane punishment, even for something as bad as throwing Inui juice all over the court. It was a new record. But to punish the whole club?

Ryoma very nearly protested, seeing as he and his opponent were probably the only people on the courts not making a ruckus, but he knew Tezuka well enough by then to know when he was truly irritated, and in that situation even uttering a word would almost certainly double those laps. Not wanting to risk the captain's displeasure, he immediately set off with the rest of the club members, inwardly cursing his decision to add extra weights for the match. A quick glance at his team mates revealed that he wasn't the only one - Kaidoh and Inui looked like they were both wearing extra, but the prospect of two hundred laps with weights was still daunting. It was tempting to stop and remove them, but he'd probably get extra laps for dallying anyway, so the result would inevitably be the same.

Sighing, he set off around the courts, quickly overtaking the despairing trio of freshmen and joining the mob of grumbling juniors and seniors.

Thirty minutes later, he was on his ninetieth lap and his legs were starting to burn. The freshmen had been forced to drop out several laps ago, their stamina still not quite up to the task. A good portion of the juniors had started to lag as well, and some were a good five or six laps behind. The regulars were, as usual, leading the pack, but even their pace had slowed somewhat. Eiji had dropped to the back of the group, and Ryoma himself was only just managing to keep up with Momoshiro and Kawamura. He didn't think it particularly fair that he was expected to keep up with his shorter stride, but there was little that could be done about it. He HAD been lacking a hard workout recently, after all.

At 140 laps, his legs were growing numb, and even Kaidoh seemed to be struggling. More than half of the juniors had dropped out at that

point and were sprawled on the grass, trying to catch their breath. Tezuka had let them, obviously figuring that running them to the point of exhaustion was punishment enough for their unruly behaviour. His stern eyes following the regulars, however, indicated that they would not receive such leniency.

170 laps, and there were only a couple of non-regulars still running, though they were still several laps behind. At 190 laps, it was just the regulars, and all of them were wilting badly. Eiji had fallen behind the rest of the pack, with Oishi running beside him to keep him company. Momoshiro and Fuji were leading, but only just, as Kaidoh and Inui had given their positions up to them, obviously finally feeling the strain of the extra weights. Ryoma himself was just barely in front of the Golden Pair.

The last ten laps were torturous, though. The freshman's legs felt like lead, and momentum seemed to be the only thing keeping them going. Sweat poured down his brow and his breath came in short, sharp gasps. When he finally dragged himself to the end of the last lap, he collapsed on the ground, sprawled out on his back, desperately trying to drag oxygen into his exhausted body.

He blinked in surprise when he saw Tezuka holding out his water bottle. "Thanks," he rasped, sitting up and thirstily chugging the refreshing liquid.

"You're wearing too many weights. You shouldn't push yourself past what your body can handle just for an ordinary practice," the senior lectured.

Ryoma smirked slightly. "Che, and get more laps for wasting time while I take them off? Besides, Kaidoh-senpai and Inui-senpai are wearing more than usual too." He inclined his head in their direction. Sure enough, even the fit junior was bent over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. That the inexhaustible Viper was that worn out made the freshman feel a little better about his own state of tiredness.

Tezuka didn't respond, standing straight and heading to the front of the collection of club members sprawled on the grass next to the courts. The freshmen and juniors that had dropped out early had recovered by then, and were sitting up, murmuring their usual comments about the regulars managing to actually make it through the mammoth two hundred laps. They fell silent when it appeared that the captain was about to address them.

"Let this be a lesson to all of you - just because there are no upcoming tournaments going into winter, doesn't mean that you can slack off during practice! Playing around will not be tolerated. I expect everybody to give their best tomorrow. Let's not get careless. Club dismissed!"

The juniors that had recovered got up and made their way to the showers while the freshmen started packing up the court. Ryoma sat on the grass with the other regulars for a few minutes, trying to gather his energy.

Eventually, he dragged himself to his feet and headed for the clubhouse to shower and change, following after a chattering Momoshiro and surprisingly forgiving Kikumaru. Then again, it wasn't in the upbeat senior's nature to seriously sulk, even if Inui's bizarre juice was involved. And it had been sort of funny. Still, when the regulars claimed the clubhouse changing rooms, everyone gave Tezuka a wide berth and kept their voices hushed. Their captain was strict, certainly, but it was pretty rare that they managed to irritate him enough to get even 50 laps, much less two hundred. Ryoma didn't pay their whispering much mind as he changed into his street clothes.

"Oi, Echizen!" Momoshiro said when he emerged from the showers. "I can't come for burgers today - I have to get home early."

"Okay," he replied, not even really sure why the junior was speaking as though it were an apology.

"See you tomorrow!" the power player called as he ran out of the clubhouse. Ryoma stared after him, then shrugged. It worked out better anyway - practice had finished later than usual, and he was still tired from all those laps. The idea of going home, doing his homework, taking a long hot bath and having an early night was rather appealing for once.

He bade farewell to the rest of the regulars and started walking home. The weather was pleasant - it was autumn, so the days were still warm, but the evenings were refreshingly cool. It was good weather to play tennis in, but he lamented the fact that it would probably be too cold soon, and the courts would be covered in snow and the balls wouldn't be able to get much bounce. Apparently the club continued to meet regularly until first snow, at which point they only met on Saturdays to work out and do drills in the school gym, though usually that was about when the seniors starting handing over the reins to the juniors as they started their high school entrance exams anyway. Ryoma's mouth puckered a little at that thought. He was going to miss playing some of the seniors - especially Tezuka. Even if he'd won their last match, it had been tennis he'd thoroughly enjoyed and thus he was eager to play again, especially after seeing how much the captain had improved at the Nationals. It was a sort of novel sensation for him, wanting to play someone even after he'd defeated them, but it was going to be tricky once the seniors moved on to high school. Hopefully he could at least weasel one more game out of his captain before he graduated. And maybe finish that game with Fuji, too.

The freshman kicked at the leaves scattered across the footpath absently and adjusted the straps of his bags on his shoulders. It was too early to be thinking about the next year - there were at least another four or five months left before the seniors graduated. He'd worry about it then. And it wasn't like they were going to vanish from the face of the earth. In fact, chances were most of them would ignore the high school entrance exams and go straight onto Seishun Gakuen's high school using the ladder system. Academically, at least, it was supposed to be pretty good, but he hadn't heard

anything about their tennis team. That would inevitably change if Tezuka and Fuji, along with the nationally ranked Golden Pair, made it there. The thought brought a dry smirk to his lips.

So caught up in his own thoughts was the freshman that he almost didn't notice that he'd arrived home. Coming out of his trance, it was a surprise to see the front door wide open - with his father out the back in the temple, his mother working late and Nanako away, he'd been expecting to let himself in.

"I'm home!" he called out automatically, undoing his shoes in the foyer.

"Hey, little bro! Welcome back!" a vaguely familiar voice replied.

Ryoma froze, hazel eyes wide as he raised his head, catching sight of what looked to be almost an older version of himself, and quite possibly one of the last people he'd ever expected to greet him home.

"Ryoga?!"

Chapter 2

Author's Note: In this chapter, the nature of the plot bunny is revealed. Um, did I mention that this was primarily an angsty hurt/comfort sort of fic?

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 2

"What are you doing here?" Ryoma asked, almost stumbling over his words in his shock.

For one crazy moment, it seemed like a hallucination, or a dream that would vanish at any moment. Even after a spree of rapid eye blinks, though, Ryoga was still there in the flesh with his sloping smile, lazy eyes and eerie familial resemblance, complete with the green-black hair and vaguely cat like features. It was just downright strange to see someone who looked so much like yourself and your father out of the blue like that, even if you intellectually knew that they were family and the similarity was to be expected.

The elder Echizen grinned, then replied, "Looking for you, of course!" He reached over and mussed the freshman's hair playfully. "Want to play a match?"

"What?" The first year was feeling completely lost.

"A match. I spoke to the old man, and he agreed it was time. So put your shoes back on and come out to the court, okay? The old man will referee."

"But-" Ryoma started. His mind was whirling with questions, and he was still tired after practice; he really didn't feel like playing tennis

right then.

"Hurry along! You're not allowed to forfeit!" his brother called out, already heading out the back towards the court.

Not sure what exactly was going on but figuring it best just to go along with things, Ryoma deposited his bags in his room and changed back into his tennis clothes. Of all the people he'd been expecting to see when he'd arrived home that day, Ryoga was the very last. The possibility of his flighty half-brother - at least, what little information he'd managed to wrangle from his parents about him labelled him as such - turning up at his house hadn't even been considered; not then, not ever. So even if he felt too tired to be playing a proper match right then, he'd go along with it if it meant getting questions answered.

Stopping by the kitchen, he grabbed a Ponta and chugged it on the way to the court in hopes that the sugar and caffeine rush would replenish his drained stamina. Ryoga was already warming up on the other side of the court, and his father had stacked several chairs on top of each other to create a dodgy and somewhat dangerous-looking umpire's chair. Ryoma still couldn't quite get past the fact that his brother was standing across from him on this particular court. It hadn't been even three months since they'd seen each other last. That was a record, considering that it had been a good six or seven years between their previous meetings.

"Oi, brat, you ready yet?" his father taunted.

"Che, why have you turned up now?" Ryoma asked, ignoring his father and addressing his brother instead.

Again, Nanjiroh interrupted before he could get an answer. "It's good timing, isn't it? I was starting to think this kid was never going to show up again. Then he just pops up out of nowhere this afternoon."

Ryoga smirked. "Heh, I did like the idea of never seeing your face again, but I hear that cute little Nanako has grown up into a lovely

lady!"

Ryoma wasn't certain if he should feel some sort of sibling solidarity in his and Ryoga's shared contempt of their father, or disgust at the similarities in Ryoga and Nanjiroh's personalities. He eventually settled on the side of admiration. Ryoga was still more bearable than his father.

"Ah, unlucky! Such bad timing! Our darling Nanako just left yesterday on a trip. She's not supposed to be back for another couple of weeks."

"That's a shame. I guess I'll be sticking around then."

His father laughed, to Ryoma's surprise. "Play the match first, Ryoga. Then we'll see."

"Should I just leave you two to it?" Ryoma remarked dryly.

"Che, so impatient, brat. Okay, whoever wins gets to stay!"

"Whatever," the freshman drawled, tired of his father's jokes and moving to the net.

"Smooth," Ryoga called.

The racquet fell on rough. "My serve." It seemed like he wasn't going to get to have a proper conversation with his brother until the match was over and done with. Why did his stupid father have to use tennis for everything? Couldn't he just say hello like a normal person? And why was he acting so blasé about his long-lost son turning up out of nowhere?

Ryoma immediately fired off his twist serve and earned two easy points before Ryoga got used to its new speed and power. They battled over the remaining points, sticking to relatively simple shots, with the freshman only pulling out a Drive B to win the last point.

What would his mother would think of the situation - a long lost family member turning up after so long and rather than ask where he'd been and why he'd come back, they were playing tennis? Then again, she probably wouldn't be surprised, given that she'd shown such devotion to a pervert like his father against all common sense. Still, would she be shocked or just take it in stride as well? The youth vaguely recalled that she'd been very fond of Ryoga when they were little, but the odds were that he wasn't her actual son, since by his estimation Ryoga would have had to be born before his parents had even met.

Ryoma was so focused on his thoughts that he didn't even see Ryoga's first serve go whizzing past. He blinked in surprise.

"15-Love! Hey, brat, you awake now?"

The freshman didn't respond, but was at least paying more attention. Barely catching the second serve, he and his brother embarked on a short rally that he eventually won. There was a lot more power in Ryoga's shots than before, though, and it seemed like the waters were still being tested. Tezuka's words sprung to mind. "Let's not get careless."

His brother won the third serve, then the fourth, and then the game.

They changed court, and Ryoga took the next game as well, though Ryoma made him chase after his shots by hitting deep into the corners. He'd taken two points out of the game before Ryoga managed a trio of powerful smashes, breaking his service. Ryoma scowled at losing that many points in a row. His brother's play wasn't fancy, and he didn't use that many tricky shots, but his strokes were clean, powerful and precise, and he seemed able to return even the hardest shots with apparent ease. The freshman was tempted to draw out his cyclone smash, but he was already losing the stamina battle, and using that shot would drain him even faster.

Still, he was barely able to bite back his groan when the next point was lost because he'd been too slow to respond to a shot. The

following game was fought to deuce more than once, before another high-speed serve rocketed past him in a no-touch ace.

"Game to Echizen Ryoga, four games to one!" his father announced, enjoying his role as umpire entirely too much. Ryoma tried to glare at him, but the setting sun was behind him and wound up forcing him to look away. Stupid old man.

Ryoga stepped back, resting his racquet on his shoulder, "Hey bro, are you really playing seriously? This is nothing like that match we had on that cruise ship."

"Mada mada da ne," the freshman replied automatically, tugging his cap over his eyes. It was true he wasn't really playing with everything he had - all of those extra laps in practice had been more tiring than he wanted to admit, and his heart wasn't really in the match.

Besides, he was still in a state of shock over Ryoga turning up at their house out of the blue like that. He felt a little bad, knowing how much it annoyed him when his opponent wouldn't play him seriously, but what did his older brother expect when he'd pretty much forced him into a match the second he had arrived home? How was anybody supposed to concentrate under those conditions?

Still, he owed his elder brother better than this. He resolved to put more effort into the game - the cruise had been quite some time ago, after all, and Ryoga had been a plenty tough opponent then. If his legs were a little tired, he'd just have to run his opponent around the court a bit more to even things up.

With several long rallies and a lot of net play, Ryoma managed to take the next two games and get his brother at least working up a bit of a sweat. His own movements were becoming stiff, though, and Ryoga won the following game. They struggled back and forth for the next game, hitting deuce countless times as neither of them would let the other get two points in a row, before Ryoma finally pulled out his Cyclone Smash. It wasn't quite as powerful as it normally was, but it was enough to get past an opponent who hadn't been expecting it.

"Heh, every time I see that shot I'm impressed," Ryoga commented. "You teach him that one, old man? That seems like favouritism!"

No one bothered replying as they entered the ninth game. Ryoma inwardly cursed as he missed two easy returns, and another where the unexpected power of his opponent's shot caused him to hit out. Ryoga wound up taking that game too.

The next few points were desperate as the young prodigy put in more energy than he realistically still had, managing to steal a few points. Still, before he knew it, Ryoga was up five games to four, and the score was 40-30. His brother was sitting on match point.

Ryoma was slightly annoyed with himself for not being able to rise to the occasion despite his best efforts. His elder brother had become stronger. Ryoma had improved too, and he *knew* under normal circumstances that he could take the match, but his concentration - normally one of the strongest parts of his game - had failed him. It wasn't good enough. His training regime would have to be increased. Defeating Tezuka again would be impossible if he let himself slip like this.

A comeback was still possible, though. Ordering himself to focus and ignore his tired legs, he focused his eyes on the ball Ryoga was holding, the sweatiness of his palms gripping the handle of the racquet and leaden muscles becoming secondary to everything but the game.

"Hey, Ryoma!"

The freshman briefly turned his attention to his opponent's face. Instead of the usual laid-back smirk, he was surprised to see his brother sporting a deadly serious expression.

"Sorry, but you're old enough to take care of yourself now. It's my turn."

The last rays of sunlight disappeared over the horizon and twilight started to set in. Ryoga served, Ryoma blinked, and it was over.

"Game, Set and Match! Echizen Ryoga wins six games to four!"

Ryoma stared, disappointed with himself, but shrugged all the same. It might have bothered him more if he didn't *know* that he could beat Ryoga. And his brother really had played well, throwing himself completely into the match. If anything, he was more disappointed that he hadn't been able to force himself to do the same.

"Oi, Ryoma, you lost. You've got an hour. Go pack your things," his father said, voice suddenly stern as he left the court.

"What?"

He turned to Ryoga, who was standing there with a mildly guilty expression on his face. "Weren't you listening, bro? Whoever wins, gets to stay."

"Gets to... stay?"

His elder brother looked off the side, not meeting his eyes. "Pack your bags, chibisuke. You might want to hurry. When he says an hour, he means an hour."

"Hey, but-" What was going on? What did he miss?

"Don't waste time. Move, move!" Ryoga gave him a friendly push back towards the house. Thoroughly confused, he headed back inside the house, only stopping briefly for a drink of water to refresh his parched throat.

Half an hour later it was getting dark outside and Ryoma was in his room, haphazardly throwing his things into a duffel bag more or less on automatic, not understanding but going along with it for the moment, as he had been all afternoon. His school bag and tennis bag sat next to his bed where he'd left them upon his arrival home,

still untouched. The freshman folded his two spare uniforms and packed them in his bag, following them with all of the clothes he regularly wore from his closet. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that he was determined to ignore. The stupid old man was probably sending him on some training trip or something - it wasn't the first time such a thing had happened out of the blue. Or maybe he was being sent to a friend's house while Ryoga was there? That didn't make any sense, as his brother could just take Nanako's currently unoccupied room, or share, but how was he to know how his father's twisted logic worked?

Firmly repeating that to himself, Ryoma fetched his toiletries from the bathroom, threw a few books for reading into his bag, as well as some extra grip tape, tennis balls, and a spare cap. He hesitated when reaching for his wallet, and then grabbed his meagre savings that had been hidden inside a book. Just in case his father thought it funny to send him somewhere ridiculous, he wanted to have enough money to catch a bus or a train home.

After stuffing a few more items in as an afterthought - just some stationary and a map - he proceeded to pull the zipper on his duffel bag closed. There. The hour was up, and it was time to go find out what harebrained scheme his father - and now brother - had in mind this time.

There was no need to search the old man out; when he turned around he found him lounging against the doorway. Years of practice were all that prevented the freshman from starting.

"Oi, you ready to leave yet?" The usual mirth was missing from Nanjiroh's expression, and Ryoma found himself oddly unsettled by it.

"Where am I going?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

Ryoma was more than just thoroughly confused by this point, and he'd had enough of being left in the dark. He sat down on the bed in a show of defiance and crossed his arms. "I'm not going anywhere until you explain." See how the old man handled that.

He wasn't sure what he expected his father to do, but he certainly hadn't been prepared for him to grasp him by his arms and haul him bodily to his feet. It took a second for his mind to process what was happening, and by then the freshman was already being dragged into the hallway.

"Hey, no, stop! Let go!" Ryoma hollered, growing scared and trying to dig in his heels in protest, but his father simply lifted him up so that his feet couldn't get purchase. His struggles were useless, and not for the first time the youth found himself cursing his height as his scrabbling movements failed to free him. In seconds, they'd reached the porch, where Nanjiroh half pushed, half threw the freshman onto the front lawn.

Ryoma threw out his hands in times to prevent planting his face on the ground as he landed with a dull thump. "What the-? Old man!"

"You lost," his father said simply. "You're on your own now. Come back in a year and try your luck again. And don't even think about trying to sneak back in." With no further words than that, Nanjiroh turned on his heel and headed back into the house.

Ryoma sat there on the front lawn, palms of his hands stinging from their harsh impact with the ground, stunned at his father's words. Was the old man serious? Was he really...?

Ryoga emerged from the front door a moment later with his duffel bag, school bag and tennis racquets in tow. He set them down next to the stunned freshman, and gave him a cocky smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "See ya in a year, chibisuke. Take care of yourself, okay? Get stronger!"

"What-?"

"Catch you later!" Ryoga threw him an orange. It sailed through the air and landed on the ground near his knees without being caught, rolling off into the grass. Ryoga shrugged, and headed back into the lit interior of the house, pulling the door shut behind him with an eerie sort of finality.

It felt rather like that door would never open again.

Where was he supposed to go? Where *could* he go?

It was clear he wasn't welcome there anymore.

After a moment, it was as though sensation returned to the freshman's limbs, and he became aware of the tickle of dewy grass against his knees and the rough fabric of his duffle bag brushing his arm. He ought to get moving - it was almost dark. Standing and gathering his bags, Ryoma turned and started walking somewhat robotically towards Momoshiro's house, legs just moving over the familiar path by their own accord.

What had just happened?

Ryoma wasn't capable of processing anything at that point in time. Rational thought had betrayed him, and his thoughts were swirling chaotically, each one slipping past too fast to properly comprehend. Had he just been thrown out of his house because he'd lost a tennis match? Had his father been truly serious when he'd laid those terms down?! He'd assumed it was a joke, as every second thing that came out of Echizen Nanjiroh's mouth tended to be.

What was he supposed to do? This wasn't the sort of situation he'd even *pondered* before.

Why couldn't everything just be like tennis? He'd know what to do then.

Amidst the haze, Ryoma eventually realised that his legs weren't moving anymore and that his autopilot had brought him to

Momoshiro's house. The familiar building was dark. He shifted from foot to foot uneasily, but walked up the path and knocked on the door anyway. Silence was his only greeting. Even after knocking a little more forcefully, no one answered. Obviously his senpai - and his family - weren't home. He couldn't recall the junior saying anything about a family outing earlier that day, but then, it was always possible he just hadn't been paying attention.

Ryoma was suddenly acutely aware of how heavy his bags were on his already tired shoulders, and the aching soles of his feet. Where to next? He couldn't very well just stay there - some nosy person would probably call the police about some suspicious delinquent hanging out in their neighbour's yard. And the familiar landmark felt terribly alien and uncomfortable all of a sudden. Sticking around wasn't an option.

Tired, the freshman shuffled away from his friend's house and headed vaguely in the direction of street tennis courts. His mind was numb as he walked the streets with no particular destination. The last vestiges of twilight had long been swept away, and Ryoma's stomach growled irritably. He ignored it, not currently able to stand even the thought of food, still trying to wrap his mind around what to do next. Eventually he stopped in a small park several blocks away from the school. It had never really caught his notice before, not being along his regular route, but he was grateful for a place to rest his feet now.

Momoshiro wasn't home, and he didn't think he could handle Kikumaru's energy at that point in time - not to mention, it would be a painfully long walk to the acrobat's house with all of his bags. Who else could he turn to? The only remaining regulars whose addresses he knew were Kawamura and Tezuka. He liked Kawamura well enough, but they weren't particularly close, and chances were the senior would be helping with the sushi shop at this time of day. Nor could he really turn up at the door of the shop with his bags.

It was tempting to go to Tezuka's place, if only because the senior's calm, stabilizing presence might return some order to his world that

had just been thrown into disarray. In the end, though, Ryoma couldn't bring himself to stand. It just... didn't feel right, imposing on his captain like that. And he didn't want to admit that he'd lost to Ryoga, either. The senior would almost certainly be disappointed in him.

Ryoma sat there in the cool evening air for some time, mind blank. He was jerked back to awareness only when he felt his eyelids drooping. A quick glance at his watch revealed that it was nearly midnight. How long had he been sitting there? Going to any of his senpai's places was completely out of the question now.

The park was still deserted, lit only by one streetlight near the road that was half obscured by a tree. It was rather secluded.

Ryoma found himself jumping in fright when a brief breeze rustled the leaves. He scowled, angry with himself for getting spooked by something so lame. But it still felt too quiet. A car would occasionally go past on the road, and there was the odd set of footsteps passing by, making him unreasonably nervous now he was aware of it. Still, despite the intermittent signs of movement from the road and footpath, the park remained empty. Maybe he could just spend the night here? At this point in time even the ground was looking comfortable.

Another pair of footsteps wandered past, accompanied by a deep, murmuring voice of someone obviously talking into their phone. Ryoma tensed, relaxing only when they were out of earshot again. Reluctantly, he gathered his bags and made for a patch of grass mostly obscured by shrubs that wouldn't be visible from the road. Sleeping on the ground wasn't a big deal, but it would be wise to take precautions so that he was hidden from the casual observer, thus reducing the risk of someone trying to steal his bags while he slept.

Once certain that his hiding spot wouldn't be easily visible to anyone until they were practically on top of him, the freshman pulled his spare jacket out of his duffel bag and lay it over himself like a blanket

before resting his head against his bag as though it were a pillow. The coarse fabric and lumpy contents hardly made it ideal, but it was better than the ground.

Ryoma found himself staring into the black night sky, dotted with pinpricks of starlight. The day had been so normal. He'd woken up with Karupin curled up against his side, traded insults with his father over breakfast, gone to school, and run a ridiculous number of laps in afternoon practice. Then all of a sudden, Ryoga had turned up, challenged him to a match, and he found himself physically thrown from his house with next to no explanation and nowhere to go.

Even though he was exhausted, sleep didn't come easily.

Chapter 3

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 3

Ryoma woke that morning completely disorientated, uncertain of where exactly he was and wondering why there was sunlight on his face. He blinked groggily as the events of the day before and the restless night came rushing back to him. Obviously he'd managed to drop off properly eventually, though a glance at his watch informed him that it was still early morning - his normal waking time wasn't for another hour.

The park wasn't quite so... ominous in the morning sunlight. It was a little dingy and distinctly lacking any features save for a couple of shady trees, a few park benches and a drinking fountain, but it seemed so much more normal and harmless now that he could observe it with proper light. It certainly made him feel a little silly for being so spooked the night before. He stretched his stiff shoulders, contemplating what to do next. It was still early, but there was nothing else to be done - might as well head to morning practice. He wrinkled his nose in distaste as he looked down at his crumpled clothes. It wouldn't hurt to make use of the clubhouse's shower facilities, either.

Glancing at his bags thoughtfully, he withdrew his wallet and school uniform and stuffed them into his backpack, then shoved the duffel bag deep into the bushes, half covering it with some leaves. Standing back to inspect his work, Ryoma decided that it shouldn't be visible to anyone who didn't know it was there - he'd have to be extremely unlucky to have anyone trip over it. He'd come back and fetch it after school - it was too big to lug around everywhere. It was

inconvenient, and the thought of leaving what was apparently now the entirety of his worldly possessions behind like that was anxiety inducing, but there wasn't a whole lot of choice in the matter. Most people would probably hand it in as lost property if they happened to find it, so it should be safe enough.

Ryoma dusted himself off and emerged from the bushes, stopping by the water fountain to wash his face. After double-checking that his school and tennis bags were both in order, he headed out onto the footpath with the morning joggers, making his way towards Seigaku for lack of another destination. He walked on automatic, only stopping briefly at a convenience store to pick up some energy bars for breakfast - his rumbling stomach had acutely reminded him that he'd never had an opportunity to eat dinner the night before, and he was positively famished.

The energy bars tasted like cardboard in his mouth, but he paid it no mind as he mechanically headed towards school, relieved to find that he arrived as the gates were first opening. Ryoma quickly made his way to the clubhouse, but was surprised to find it locked. Of course... he was normally one of the last to arrive at morning practice.

He was filthy and dirty from sleeping on the ground - he desperately needed that shower. Unfortunately, it looked like that was going to have to wait until after practice after all.

Oishi arrived after he'd been waiting for about ten minutes, slouched against the clubhouse wall.

"Echizen?" the vice-captain asked in surprise. "Oh, good morning! I'm sorry - when I saw that someone had arrived at the clubhouse before me, I guess I was expecting it to be Tezuka."

Ryoma cleared his throat, finding it surprisingly hard to form words. "Morning, Oishi-senpai," he eventually ground out. His voice sounded strangely alien to his ears, and suddenly the entire situation took on a sensation of hyperrealism. It all felt... almost *too* normal.

How could things still be so normal, when everything he thought he knew had changed?

The kindly 'mother' of Seigaku's tennis club busied himself unlocking the clubhouse and putting his bags away. "What brings you here so early today?"

"Nothing special," he replied automatically.

Oishi frowned at that. Ryoma knew that his answer was unsatisfactory to his senpai, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Fortunately, the vice-captain seemed to shrug it off with a smile as he set about gathering the nets and preparing for the rest of the team's arrival.

Ryoma wandered out as the other club members started trickling in - getting more than just a few surprised glances at his uncanny earliness. He didn't even notice.

When practice started, he went through the daily greetings and morning drills like a zombie, mostly because he didn't know what else to do. He had some dim memory of Tezuka scolding him for not paying attention and assigning him laps, which he was grateful to do because they didn't require any thought. When practice was called to a close, he headed to class for lack of any other ideas.

Homeroom passed in a haze, as did maths and history. Fortunately, none of the teachers called on him, so no one noticed that he hadn't paid a whit of attention all day. At least, that was until Japanese literature before lunch.

"Echizen! Echizen!" The teacher barked, drawing his attention at last.

"Hm?" he asked, not so much startling out of his reverie as floating away from it. He was aware, of course, that his concentration both in practice that morning and class all day had been poor, but couldn't bring himself to care.

"Your homework," the teacher repeated impatiently. "Hand it in."

He blinked. Homework? "I don't have it."

"Do you need to fetch it?"

"No," he amended, "I mean I didn't do it."

The class went silent, a little surprised. Echizen Ryoma was well known for sleeping in class, but he'd always had a perfect record for homework and tests. It wasn't particularly a huge deal, as all students forgot every now and again, or things came up, but it was obvious that the teacher wasn't quite certain of how to deal with the fact that one of the more reliable members of the class had announced quite easily that they hadn't done the homework - and in such a tone of voice that suggested that homework was the least of their concerns at that moment. Eventually, he just settled on saying, "Don't let it happen again," and moved on to collecting the work from the rest of the students.

The bell rang a minute or so later - Ryoma robotically stood from his seat when they were dismissed for lunch, ignoring the calls of his classmates as he made his way to the roof.

It all felt so surreal. Everything felt so terribly normal - it was almost as though the day before had been a horrible nightmare. It had been impossible to process anything the night before - he'd been in shock, and to a certain degree still was now, but the familiar routine and surroundings he was now immersed in helped re-centre his universe.

The roof was thankfully deserted, and the freshman took up a spot near the fences at the far edge so he could stare out over the school grounds. Some of the clubs had activities during lunch hour, but the lawns were mostly filled with groups of students gathered in loose circles having lunch. Their chatter couldn't reach the roof, though, muted to a general background warble largely drowned out by the gentle buffing of the wind and rustling of tree leaves.

The entire situation was starting to piece together in his mind. So far it had been 'Ryoga appeared out of the blue, challenged him to a match, he lost, and suddenly he was out on the streets'. Now, though, he was rewinding through the previous evening, finding hidden meaning in his brother's comments and sifting through even older memories of his kin in order to make sense of everything that had occurred.

So far, he'd been able to establish that their father, tennis-obsessed weirdo that he was, must have set up some sort of twisted competition between them when they were younger. Ryoma's memories of the time when Ryoga was still living with them were fuzzy, but he could vaguely recall playing two matches with him before the one on the cruise ship, though Ryoga, being quite a bit older, had let him win both times so they'd never counted as proper games in his mind. More telling now was that he recalled Ryoga disappearing after each match - and after the second match not returning until their fateful meeting aboard the cruise ship. As far as he could tell, the conditions of the matches must have been that whoever lost was kicked out - Ryoga must have taken pity on him and thrown both of the matches. His father could be especially harsh with training when he became impatient, but Ryoma couldn't remember him ever being quite so Spartan. Why would he organise a competition with those sorts of stakes? Humiliation was more his deal. Hate and resentment bubbled deep within - Ryoma's desire to completely destroy his father with tennis had now been magnified a hundred fold.

A small, more rational part of him wondered if that was what his father had wanted from the very beginning. The old man had been put out when he'd expressed more of an interest in Tezuka as his rival rather than the great Echizen Nanjirou, as had been the case since forever. Had he maybe even called Ryoga back so that he'd have a new reason to hate him, to want to beat him in tennis? Was it all just his father's ploy to make himself Ryoma's number one rival yet again? Or was he trying to turn Ryoga into that rival instead? More than once his father had remarked that the 'kid-captain' was

filling his head with all sorts of silly ideas about winning not mattering and whatnot - maybe this was just his way of taking his attention away from Tezuka and placing it back on himself?

He shook his head as though to clear it. That theory was ridiculous. It didn't match with what Ryoga had said at all. It seemed a lot more like his elder brother had tired of living a wandering lifestyle and had come back to reclaim his place now that Ryoma was old enough to take care of himself. He hadn't yet decided how he felt about that. Though the term 'feeling' was a bit beyond him at the moment. Other than a brief spike of resentment for his father, Ryoma was finding it curiously difficult to feel anything at all. Reality still hadn't properly set in, he supposed.

It was absurd, and cruel, but his father was good at absurd and cruel so long as he thought it might improve one's tennis. It was hard for him to comprehend, but the fact of the matter was that neither of his parents seemed to ever have any good explanation for Ryoga's sustained absence. Was this the reason? Some elaborate Spartan tradition of abandoning your children so that they'd become strong and return as some sort of super tennis player?

The ringing bell announced the end of lunch and Ryoma dragged his reluctant feet back to class, ignoring his rumbling stomach - he'd been too focused on his thoughts to even think about food. The afternoon's classes passed in a similar daze to the morning's ones; he was unable to bring himself to focus on anything, mind forever wandering to a million different topics that seemed infinitely more important to sort through.

Afternoon practice arrived; they were doing drills, presumably so that Tezuka could keep an easier eye on everyone and prevent the sort of messing around that had occurred the day before. It seemed like a lifetime ago already.

Ryoma was automatically going through the motions of his drills when suddenly Inui appeared before him, holding out a cup of blue frothy liquid with streaks of red in it.

"What?" he asked, when the senior didn't seem forthcoming with his usual spiel about his latest juice.

The data tennis player looked momentarily disconcerted, before adjusting his glasses and explaining, "You hit the ball into the blue basket instead of the red one. So you have to drink my new Marvellous Super-Deluxe Juice," he explained, holding out the glass. "No getting out of it."

Ryoma stared for a moment, belatedly realising that they'd changed drills and he hadn't even noticed. No way out of it - it was best to just deal with the consequences and keep moving. He accepted the glass wordlessly and chugged it down, not even registering the taste. When he was finished, he handed the empty glass back to the slack-jawed senior and turned back to his drills. He waited for the next ball to be fed, relaxing his stance when it didn't seem to be coming. "What?"

"Echizen, are you okay?" Arai asked - he was the one feeding the balls on the other side of the net.

"Yes," he replied. "Hurry up. How many balls do I have left?"

"Seven," Inui mumbled, shuffling away muttering under his breath. The first-year didn't even notice the slightly concerned glances of his team mates as Arai continued feeding him balls, didn't think anything was strange when Momoshiro willingly offered to treat him to burgers once practice ended, nor thought anything of it when half of the team tagged along.

He put in his regular order with his senpai and went to find a seat for them. A still-disturbed looking Inui followed him, along with a curious Fuji. A moment later, Kikumaru and Momoshiro appeared, arms laden with everyone's food.

"So... Echizen, how did you do it?" Momoshiro asked as they all started eating.

"Do what?" he replied as he chewed mechanically on his burger. It tasted like styrofoam in his mouth, but he ate it anyway.

"You know... ," Momo risked a glance at the data-gathering senior seated diagonally from him. It was strange for Inui to accompany them on an outing that didn't involve stalking, but the junior supposed the data tennis player was just as befuddled as the rest of them. "You managed to drink it."

"Drink what?"

"Inui's juice," he whispered.

Ryoma shrugged.

"Hoi hoi! Maybe it was actually okay for once? Did Inui finally make a juice that was drinkable? Gimme, Inui!" Kikumaru demanded, bouncing in his seat as he stretched out his arm.

Wordlessly, the bespectacled senior handed over his drink bottle. His classmate paused only for a second before taking a tentative sip, then dropped the bottle and ran for the bathroom.

Fuji was grinning now. "It appears not."

Ryoma stuffed the rest of the burger in his mouth and swallowed. Even if he couldn't taste it, he was hungry, having had only a few energy bars for breakfast and no lunch whatsoever. He started on his second.

"Ochibi!" Eiji gasped, when he finally re-emerged from the bathroom, scaring a few of the other customers as he did so. "That was nearly as bad as Aozu! What's your secret? Tell me!"

The first-year shrugged again, then nearly choked on his food when Momoshiro grabbed him in a headlock "Echizen, are you holding out on us? How did you do it? Did Tezuka-buchou teach you?"

"No! Go ask him if you want to know!" he replied, wresting himself free and returning to his burger.

"Heh, all that Ponta you drink probably finally destroyed your taste buds," the junior remarked, digging into his own meal at last.

"That is highly improbable. For Echizen's Ponta intake to have that sort of effect, he'd have to drink-"

"It was just a joke, Inui," Fuji interrupted, eyes still fixed on the quiet freshman.

The conversation turned to other topics after that, and while his teammates continually tried to draw him into their discussions, Ryoma remained mostly silent, only making brief comments when prompted. Fuji kept staring at him and Inui occasionally glanced at him and scribbled a few more notes in his notebook, but other than that no one pressed him for anything more. His senpai's words seemed muted, as though they were underwater, and Ryoma found his attention continually drifting off into grey space.

It was getting late by the time they left McDonalds. The seniors bade them farewell at the door, even going so far as to address the freshman personally, but he didn't respond outside of an absent-minded wave. Ryoma then proceeded to follow a chattering Momoshiro to the sports gear shop; mostly out of habit as that was what they normally did on Wednesdays. He stared through the merchandise without seeing it, and then numbly followed his friend to the counter where he was purchasing some new sweatbands.

"Echizen, want a ride home?" Momoshiro asked cheerfully as they left the shop.

For the first time that day, Ryoma's world focused properly. "No, it's alright Momo-senpai," he blurted. "I just remembered I have a couple of errands to run. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hey, Echizen!" Momoshiro called out as he started walking away. Ryoma half-turned at his words. "If something IS bothering you, you know you can talk to me about it, right?" he said with a serious expression.

In that one brief instant, Ryoma very nearly spilled everything to the junior. As his mouth started to form the words, though, his throat clenched.

He couldn't do it. Not just yet.

Instead, he just muttered, "Okay, Momo-senpai," and walked away.

Chapter 4

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 4

Ryoma's second night in the park was marginally better than the first. Now that he'd seen it in daytime, the menacing shadows all had benign objects attached to them. He still cringed at how easily spooked he became - for the first couple of hours he continued to tense whenever footsteps or voices wafted within earshot. His heart almost stopped when one pedestrian walked through sometime around ten at night, obviously using the park as a shortcut, but they passed right by him without even missing a step. That had been the only case of anyone actually entering the hidden patch of forgotten green, so he managed to eventually relax enough to drift off into an uneasy sleep.

Morning once again came far too soon for his tastes - Ryoma woke up with a twig digging into his side, with the sun only just breaching the horizon. His unsuccessful attempts at falling back to sleep were not accommodated by the cold, dewy ground and the dead leaves tickling his legs. With a sigh, the freshman sat up, resigned to another early morning. His stomach complained of hunger, reminding him that he'd barely eaten the day before, but it was hard to process through a sleep-deprived brain.

Ryoma arrived early at morning practice again and resorted to hitting a ball against the wall while he waited for someone to come and open the clubhouse. Oishi turned up after a few minutes.

"Oh, Echizen, early again, huh?" he asked cheerfully.

"Hn."

"I have to say, it's nice to have someone turn up before me for a change. Twice in a row! Are you turning over a new leaf?"

"Something like that," he replied in a dry tone.

Oishi laughed, though he immediately turned his humour into concern. "Seriously, though, are you doing okay Echizen? You seemed really out of it yesterday, and you don't look like you've been sleeping well."

"The house has just been noisy the past few mornings," he lied, "Makes it hard to sleep in."

"Ah, I understand," the vice-captain agreed. "It seems like whenever I actually try to sleep in, there's some racket in the kitchen to wake me up. I guess over time I've become used to waking up early."

Ryoma didn't bother responding. He raised a hand to cover a yawn. Once they finished setting up the courts, he wandered off to start his warm-ups early, but moved through them so sluggishly that most of the rest of the club had arrived by the time he'd finished. At Ryuzaki-sensei's direction, he started feeding balls to the juniors who'd also finished warming up for their backhand practice. Having to focus what little concentration he had on the task in his tiredness, he remained completely oblivious to the discussions about him taking place just two courts over.

"What do you think was wrong with Echizen yesterday?" Fuji asked, approaching Tezuka.

"I have no idea," the captain responded, not even pausing in his stretches.

"I thought maybe he was just having an off day, but he didn't even react to Inui's juice."

"Inui?" Tezuka deferred as the senior in question walked up behind them.

The senior paused in his notebook scribbling to fiddle with his glasses. "At first I was inclined to believe that his problem was personal in nature, perhaps caused by some tragedy as many of his symptoms were indicative of a severe emotional shock. However, after further observation yesterday afternoon and his appearance this morning, there is a 75 chance that he is either merely ill or experiencing a brief bout of insomnia. It explains his poor concentration, fatigue and his lack of reaction to my juice yesterday. It is quite common for one's sense of taste to dramatically diminish when one becomes ill or overtired."

"Hmm, that's no good. I hope it isn't anything serious," Fuji mused.

"Echizen very rarely gets sick from what I've been able to tell. This will be an excellent opportunity for valuable data. It is good for the team to be aware of how a player's sickness pattern plays out, so that tournaments can be planned for appropriately. Did you know, for example, that Kaidoh generally only gets sick for three days, but during those days he's scarcely able to get out of bed? Kikumaru, on the other hand, tends to have his illness drawn out over a number of weeks, with brief relapses until he manages a complete recovery, but during that time he is typically able to function at about 70 of his regular capacity."

"Fascinating."

Tezuka completed his warm-ups, taking a moment to send an expressionless glance in the Ryoma's direction, before ordering, "Fuji, take three of the juniors and have them work on serve and volley. Inui, go run the freshmen through the standard set of forehand drills."

"Does that include Echizen?"

Tezuka sent the other senior a disapproving look, and Inui promptly headed over to where the rest of the freshmen were standing.

Ryoma, in the meantime, was enjoying losing himself in the familiar repetitive motions of swinging a tennis racquet. He was disappointed when morning practice was called to a close, but shuffled off to class along with everyone else without complaint, continuing to struggle to stifle his yawns. It looked as though English class was going to be relegated to nap time once again.

Classes that day at least went a little better than the day previous. He still hadn't done his homework - it hadn't seemed important at the time - but most of the teachers took one look at the deep bags under his eyes and didn't even ask. Everyone was allowed to have a couple of off days, even though Sakuno and Tomoka and the 'freshmen trio' as his senpai called them all asked him multiple times if he was okay and whether or not there was anything they could do to help. He brushed them off for the most part, but when Ryuuzaki had offered him her extra rice balls at lunch, he gratefully accepted. That act only seemed to prompt more questions, eventually forcing him to seek sanctuary on the roof once again.

Still, Ryoma knew that he had to pull himself together, and fast. He'd established his situation now, and the shock was starting to wear off. If he remained a space case through classes and practice forever, the questions wouldn't stop, and eventually someone would find out about his situation. He didn't think he could bear the embarrassment of everyone knowing. Homework would have to start being done again, for one. Ryoma figured he could use the library after tennis practice, but he wouldn't have enough time if it ran late. Finding time was going to be the tricky part. Most of it could be done during his lunch hour, but after that he might just have to do it on his lap at the park. A desk had never been considered a luxury before, but things changed fast, apparently.

Afternoon practice went a lot better than the previous, largely due to the fact that he was focusing as much of his attention on appearing as normal as possible. Again, everyone was allowed an off day, even

the regulars, but if he messed up his drills two days in a row his team mates would be giving him the third degree. Now that he was starting to pay attention, he was a little more aware of his senpai's curious eyes on him, but their attention started to drift after he'd said 'Mada mada dane' a few times and managed to complete his drills without any mistakes.

Even so, Ryoma hurried off as soon as afternoon practice had ended, forgoing burgers in attempt to avoid any more offers for a ride home from Momoshiro. The past two days had been spent sorting everything through in his mind; firstly trying to figure out what exactly had happened, then turning to the much more pertinent question of what to do about it. After he'd nearly spilled to his senpai the day before, he had stopped and reconsidered staying with a friend - surely out of all of the regulars, there ought to be someone able to put him up for a while - but he'd eventually dismissed that idea as Ryoma couldn't deal with the notion of admitting to his team mates that he'd been literally thrown out of his own home for something as absurd as losing a tennis match. And he didn't really know where else to turn. He'd never been a sociable person, and the only other family he even knew of were Nanako's parents, but they lived all the way out in the country. That wouldn't do. He had to keep attending Seigaku. It was the lone thread of normalcy he was clinging onto.

It was fortunate Seigaku wasn't a private school; he wouldn't be able to pay tuition. Since that wasn't an issue, for the time being his biggest concerns were food, shelter, and not being found out by anyone.

He'd brought all of the money he had saved with him, luckily, but that was probably only five or six thousand yen. It had seemed like quite a lot of money while he'd been saving it, but now seemed a mere pittance, as he didn't yet know when or where he'd be able to acquire money next. That was relegated to the 'problems to deal with later' section of his brain as he returned to pondering other dilemmas while heading to the park, intent on doing at least some homework before the sun set. How the heck had Ryoga done this for so many

years? Then again, his elder brother was a far more sociable individual than he ever was - he probably had plenty of friends in America he could have stayed with - and he didn't have the same sort of pride that Ryoma did. Of course he didn't; he hadn't had to put up with his old man trying to crush it every day of his life.

Dinner was bought from a ramen stand on his way to the park. It wasn't really enough to fill him up, but Ryoma was reluctant to spend his finite supply of money on something more substantial. Weighing up his options as he ate, he figured that he could probably stay at the park for a while. It wasn't a permanent solution, but he didn't have the ability to consider much more than his day-to-day necessities at that point in time. That only left keeping his secret, but all he had to do for that was think up some good excuses for turning down Momoshiro's offers for rides to and from school and he was essentially in the clear there. It was almost fortunate he was such a private person in that regard. And if he kept up the trend of getting to practice early, he only had to brush his senpai off in the afternoon.

There were other things to think about, too. He desperately wanted a proper bath, but clubhouse showers were going to have to suffice; going to the public baths would erode his meagre savings even faster than what food would. Most of the other issues could be put aside for the time being, though, while the freshman got his rhythm back and settled into a new routine.

With that temporary plan of attack in mind, he retired to the park to work on his homework until it got too dark. He wound up struggling through the last few questions under the streetlight. His handwriting was probably barely legible, but at least it was done. After that, he wandered off to the street tennis courts for a while to watch some strangers play before returning to the park to sleep.

The rest of the week passed painfully slowly. The first year took solace in his time at school, basking in the familiar presences of his teammates. After the first two nights, he'd grown somewhat used to sleeping in the park, and while he wasn't sleeping well, he at least had enough rest to function normally during classes. On his fourth

day of arriving at practice early, Oishi had presented him with a spare key to the clubhouse, saying, "It was a bit tricky to get permission since you're only a freshman, but since you're one of the regulars Ryuuzaki-sensei figured she could make an exception." Despite that, the vice-captain was still surprised to see him arrive at practice before him most days, but continued to greet him cheerfully - at least he'd stopped asking if anything was wrong, seeming happy to accept his dry remarks as explanation enough. Ryoma had thrown himself whole-heartedly into his tennis, and apparently most team members judged him by the standard of his game, so the vice-captain likely assumed that all was well if the sudden precision and power of even his right-handed game was anything to go by.

When the weekend rolled around, Ryoma tagged along with Momoshiro until the junior ditched him - presumably to go on a date with Tachibana's little sister. He took that opportunity to make his first visit to the Laundromat. Thankfully he'd packed both of his school uniforms, but he'd been alternating between the two of them all week, and they needed to be washed. As far as he knew, Laundromats were pretty cheap - and it wouldn't hurt to wash some of his other clothes, either. Sleeping on the ground tended to get your clothing dirty.

Fortunately, there was one just a couple of blocks from Seigaku, into which he wandered with his duffel bag, feeling a little lost. Neither of the other two people inside paid him any mind. By the looks of it the machines were coin operated - there wasn't a cashier in sight. There was, at least, a vending machine with washing powder. Ryoma purchased some of the same stuff he could see the tired-looking lady on the other side of the room using, quietly mimicking her movements out of the corner of his eyes and taking a wild guess at how much washing powder was needed. As soon as the lady had walked out of the shop to the convenience store across the street, he darted over to her washing machine to check that he'd matched the dials correctly. Satisfied that everything checked out, he settled down in front of his own machine, opening his books to do his homework - it looked like he was going to be there for a while.

He was just finishing his work and wondering how much longer his clothes were going to take when a mother and her child - the kid looked like he was about eight years old - wandered in. Bored, he settled for watching them out of the corner of his eyes as the child tagged along behind his mother, asking a series of inane questions which the woman answered with a patient smile.

The washer clicked as it ended its cycle, momentarily taking his attention away from the pair. Wrestling his wet clothes from the machine, he shoved them in the dryer, hand hovering anxiously over the time dial as he wondered how long it normally took clothes to dry in a dryer. Back home, Nanako had nearly always hung their washing out to dry, even though they did have a dryer. Unfortunately, he didn't have the luxury of a place to hang his clothes to dry without looking weird.

"I find about ninety minutes on these machines just about takes care of it," the mother suggested from the left.

Struggling to contain an embarrassed blush, Ryoma hurriedly twisted the dial and set the dryer running, muttering, "Thanks," as he retook his seat across from the machine.

The woman smiled at him. "You just looked a little lost. Are you doing the washing for your mother?"

Ryoma didn't know why the question hurt. If anything, he should have been irritated for being mistaken for being younger than his actual years once again. Shoving his hands in his pockets and looking away, he replied, "Something like that."

"That's so responsible of you! I can't ever imagine this one being that much of a help," she said with a beam as she ruffled her son's hair.

"Stop it!" the kid grumbled, shuffling away.

Ryoma stared at the exchange, feeling suddenly nauseous.

"Oh, but you know that you don't have to sit there and wait for your clothes, right? You can just come back and pick them back up from the machine when they're done. No one will bother them."

"I don't mind waiting," was the first-year's only reply. Even if it was highly unlikely that someone would steal his clothes, he didn't particularly feel like risking the only clothes he had. It wasn't as though he could just go buy new ones. The way his life was going these days, chances were the whole damn building would burn down if he left.

"Well, there's a stack of magazines in the back left corner to read if you didn't see them earlier," she said, finishing loading her clothes. She grasped her son's hand and started leading him from the Laundromat. "Have fun, and make sure the clothes are completely dry before you take them out or they'll smell later!"

"Thanks," he mumbled again as they left. Even though he was pretty sure that he was capable of figuring out how to do laundry on his own, it had been nice to hear some confirmation, even over inane and obvious things that were probably only inane and obvious to people who'd been doing it for ages. The freshman had rather expected that he had at least another couple of years of his mother or cousin doing his laundry before he had to even start thinking about it, after all.

At the reminder, his mind leapt unbidden to thoughts of his mother. What was his mother doing? He still didn't know what she had made of the entire situation. Was she happy to just capitulate to his father's demands like that? Originally, Ryoma did think that his mother probably wouldn't be terribly happy with his father's actions, but then, she'd let Ryoga leave, hadn't she? And she hadn't come looking for him all week, either. Maybe Ryoga was proving to be a better son, and she didn't even miss him.

It was that doubt that kept him from even trying to go back and seek her assistance. Even if he was only half sure, the young tennis player didn't think that he could handle the heartache if his mother

turned him aside so coldly; just because his father had thrown him out due to that one lousy match. It was better to leave it open-ended rather than risk having his emotions crushed. A more cynical part of him wondered if she had even noticed. She worked overtime so much these days he hardly ever saw her.

His mother had always had eyes for his father first and foremost. What she saw in him Ryoma would never understand, especially with the man's notorious flirtatiousness and attempted womanising. Still, forcing her to choose would be cruel, but not nearly as painful as the result if she were to choose his father. Yes, best to leave that issue alone. If his mother sought him out herself, it would be a different matter, but until then.... Until then he'd preserve what little pride he had remaining with all the energy he had.

There was something oddly hypnotic about watching the clothes tumble in the dryer that made it a little easier to think. Unfortunately, Ryoma was starting to severely detest thinking - the past week had given him entirely too much time alone with his thoughts. It might not have mattered so much if he actually got somewhere with it, but most of the time spent dwelling on his problems just left him brooding over them rather than finding any solution. He just couldn't see any way out of his dilemma, short of waiting a year like his father had said to challenge Ryoga again. The thought of that was less than appealing. It wasn't even the part about waiting a year; would he even want to go back to his house after he'd been thrown out? It wouldn't be a home that could be taken for granted, but rather a tenuous privilege that could expire at any moment. Maybe that was why Ryoga had never tried to come back before.

Eventually, he was rescued from his morose musings by the dryer finishing its cycle. He withdrew his clothes and folded them as best he could, taking special care with his uniform - without access to an iron they'd get wrinkled, otherwise. Ryoma left the Laundromat, giving a polite nod of acknowledgement to the mother and son who were returning just then. Sighing, he adjusted the straps on his duffel bag and headed towards the street tennis courts, hoping that maybe

some people he knew might be there so that he wasn't stuck with his own thoughts for company yet again.

It was going to be a long weekend.

Chapter 5

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 5

When Monday rolled around, the weather took a turn for the worse with foreboding clouds gathering overhead during classes. Ryoma spent the entire day anxiously watching the sky, worrying about what would happen to all of his clothes if it rained. Even if his duffel bag was rather effectively hidden in the bushes at the park, that sort of cover would hardly keep his few possessions dry. At the very least, his books would be ruined. He was only distracted from his worries by tennis practice and his rumbling stomach - with his funds already starting to run low, he'd decided to forgo buying breakfast and dinner on weekdays, and instead relied on mooching burgers off Momoshiro and hoping that Ryuuzaki or Tomoka would offer him a bento. Admittedly, he didn't feel comfortable accepting the girls' offers of lunch, worried that they might get the wrong idea - Tachibana's little sister had pulled him aside and given him a lecture on it the last time he'd been dragged along on one of her and Momoshiro's 'not-a-date's - but desperate times called for desperate measures.

Fortunately, the sky cleared up partway through afternoon practice, leaving only a cool breeze. Ryoma allowed himself to relax as he prodded his senpai into shouting him burgers again, and made a mental note to find some plastic bags to wrap around his bag later, so that when it did inevitably rain, his belongings would stand a chance against the elements. It was a big enough risk just hiding them in a park like that; he didn't think he had enough luck left to take a chance with the weather as well.

"Oi, want a ride home?" Momoshiro asked as they left the burger place.

"No thanks, Momo-senpai, I've got to go meet someone."

"Heh! No wonder you ate like a starving person! You were in a rush to your date, am I right?" the junior jibed.

"Nothing so interesting. I have to pick something up from one of my mother's colleagues." He wished his voice wouldn't hitch on his lie. Fortunately, Momoshiro wasn't that observant.

"That IS boring. Sucks to be you. You've been running a lot of errands lately, though. Are you sure you're not just avoiding me?" It was asked in a joking tone - Ryoma knew his companion didn't mean anything by it - but his answer was careful all the same.

"Hm? I guess that's true. Well, you'll just have to manage, senpai," he replied, tugging his cap down over his eyes as he walked away.

"Oi, Echizen!" Momoshiro took mock offence, then laughed. "See you tomorrow!"

"See you," Ryoma replied dully, walking away. The wind picked up, and he had to suppress the urge to rub his arms against the sudden chill. Changing direction once he was sure his senpai was out of sight, he started making his way to street courts. Some tennis would warm him up straight away.

The street courts were oddly deserted so he stayed until well after dark, practicing his serves and running himself through a wide range of solitary drills. It was a pain having to go fetch the balls himself after he was done, but that was good exercise too. His stamina had to increase so that the next time the captain assigned everyone two hundred laps he'd be able to do it with ease.

Remembering that he still had to do his homework, he headed back to the park and struggled to do it under the moonlight. Fortunately

there wasn't a lot; he'd managed to do most of it in English class.

As had become custom in the evenings, Ryoma sought out a public toilet a couple of blocks away to visit the bathroom, brush his teeth and get changed out of his sweaty clothes. Usually he just got dressed in another set of street clothes, not comfortable with the idea of sleeping in his pyjamas out in the open. After that, it was back to his little hideaway behind the bushes to at least try to get a decent night's sleep.

Three hours later found the small freshman shivering and digging through his duffel bag for another shirt. The cool breeze from earlier that day turned out to be an omen as the temperature dropped rather drastically the more the night wore on. Working his fingers to keep them warm, he huddled into a ball with his knees drawn up to his chin and hands tucked under his armpits, wishing desperately for gloves and warmer pants.

When he'd packed his bags just prior to being thrown out, Ryoma hadn't bothered packing any heavy clothes. At the time he hadn't known that he was going to be on the streets within the hour, and only packed as though he was going to a friend's house. The warmest clothes currently in his possession were a long sleeved shirt and a thin jacket - early Autumn wear. Both of those were being worn at the moment, along with his regulars' jersey, but still the cold wind cut through. He didn't have a scarf, either.

It was dark and even quieter than normal in the park, the cold having chased away the last of the crickets. The leaves rustled mockingly in the wind; the shrubs were no protection from it. Despite the cold, Ryoma eventually managed to drift off to sleep, curled up with his duffel bag at his back - some shielding from the wind being better than none - and his head resting on the ground.

When he woke in the morning he was shaking, limbs stiff from the cold. The warming kiss of sunlight on his skin was a welcome relief several minutes later, but Ryoma still wasted no time in heading for the tennis clubhouse, eager to make use of the hot showers. He

arrived at the gates a good twenty minutes before they were due to open. It was hard to wait and resist the urge to just vault over the wall and be done with it.

When Ryoma finally made it to the clubhouse, he headed straight for the showers. The water was freezing when he first turned it on, but as the hot water worked through the cold pipes blissful relief came at last. The warm water chased away the chill from his body, his feet and fingers stinging for a minute as they adjusted to the temperature change. He stayed in longer than usual, partly to rid his body of the old sock sort of feeling that came with sleeping on the ground, and partly because he didn't want to confront the cold again. Unfortunately, he had to stop before Oishi arrived at practice and wondered what he was doing using the showers *before* playing.

The bite of cold air as he redressed was sharp and unforgiving. Times like this were when he most missed his warm bed with heavy blankets and Karupin curled up against his side. This was exactly the type of morning that would normally have him sleeping in until the absolute last minute and then having to run laps for being late to practice. Still, the shower had helped somewhat; waking him up a little and loosening muscles that were sore from spending the night curled up in such an awkward position. He'd have to do extra stretches to make sure he didn't pull anything.

Ryoma sneezed as Oishi came through the door. "Excuse me," he mumbled.

The vice-captain just greeted him with a cheery smile. "It sure is cold this morning, huh?"

"Hn." Ryoma set about pulling the nets out of storage. Over the past week he'd discovered that Oishi was entirely too much of a morning person to be considered completely sane.

"I'm surprised that you're still early! I think almost everyone will sleep in a little late today. Even knowing that it'll warm up pretty fast, it was hard leaving the bed this morning, huh?"

The freshman didn't respond, barely stifling another sneeze. He rubbed at his chest, irritated at how tight it felt.

"Echizen, do you have a cold?" Oishi asked worriedly. "Do you want to go the nurse's office?"

"It's fine, senpai. Just reacting to the cold morning."

The senior didn't look convinced, but thankfully didn't press the issue.

Morning practice passed in the usual blur of dull drills and stretches. There wasn't going to be another ranking match until Spring, so that meant they were all stuck working on refining their control and improving their stamina instead of actually playing tennis. Even though Tezuka kept telling the rest of the regulars they had to improve the juniors so that the team wasn't left in the lurch once the seniors graduated, it was still boring.

Practice ended, but the day dragged on and on. Ryoma was thankful he had a double lesson of English; it meant more time for sleeping. The thought of lunch made him nauseous - even though he'd been hungry that morning - so he headed up onto the roof to work on his homework under the warm sun instead of hanging around the girls or grabbing scraps from Momoshiro. Half way through his maths problems, his eyelids grew heavy and he fell asleep.

A hand shook him awake a little later. Blinking blearily, Ryoma was greeted by the sight of a concerned-looking Oishi. He sat up too fast in his surprise, and felt as though the world was spinning briefly. He was forced to put out a hand to steady himself. Hopefully the vice-captain wouldn't notice and start worrying.

"Oh, sorry, Echizen, I didn't mean to startle you," Oishi apologised. "I was looking for Eiji when I saw you out here. Lunch is going to be over in a few minutes, and I didn't want you to be late to class."

"Oh, thanks Oishi-senpai," he said with a yawn, then massaged his throat. It felt a little scratchy.

The senior waved it off, instead observing, "You've been early to practice yet you're sleeping on the roof at lunch?"

"Been tired all day for some reason. Must be the weather," Ryoma replied offhandedly, stretching and then stifling another sneeze. He paused when he saw Oishi giving him 'that look', which generally meant that you were either about to get lectured on something or the vice-captain was about to start asking questions in a gentle, concerned voice. It was time to stage an escape.

"Thanks again for waking me up. I have to go to class." Ryoma quickly gathered his half-finished homework and hurried from the roof. He'd probably have to avoid the senior in afternoon practice as well if he wanted to avoid a lecture or an interrogation. It would probably turn into some sort of spiel about making sure he got enough sleep.

His head started to ache through his afternoon classes, but he persevered through them. By afternoon practice his throat was starting to feel sore, reflecting itself in a slight hoarseness in his voice whenever he spoke. Even if he was tired, though, he had the opportunity to play Momoshiro - Tezuka had obviously taken pity on the bored regulars and assigned everyone to matches - and won in straight sets. The memory of his match with Ryoga was burned in his memory, and he would allow no weakness or lack of concentration from himself any longer, no matter the circumstances. He should have been able to win that match with his brother, and it was irritating that he hadn't.

"Ah, 'mada mada dane', right?" Momoshiro laughed as they finished the match. "I didn't even get one game! I must be slipping."

"Heh, or Ochibi's become stronger!" Kikumarū interjected, barrelling into their conversation, high from his match against Fuji. He'd lost, of

course, but the hyperactive senior was obviously pleased at being allowed to go all out with his acrobatic play.

"He held back, too," the power player complained good-naturedly as Oishi joined them. "Didn't even use a Cyclone Smash or Drive B."

"You have improved, haven't you Echizen?" Oishi commented with a smile. "You must be doing extra practice. Just be sure not to overdo it."

Ryoma *had* been doing a lot of extra practice in the evenings at the street courts, but that was mostly due to a lack of anything else to do. Still, he could recognise the impending lecture from the vice-captain, and sought to change the subject.

"Heh, since you lost, does that mean you're paying for burgers, Momo-senpai?" Frustratingly, his voice came out somewhat gravelled, and he caught Oishi giving him that discerning look again.

"Sorry Echizen, I've got to head straight home and watch my sisters today," the junior apologised, then grabbed him in a headlock and mussed his hair. "My wallet gets a break this time! You can't sponge off your senpai all the time, you know! Who would have thought that you'd become such a cheapskate?"

"Che. Kikumar-senpai?" he tried.

"Hoi hoi, I don't have any money to feed you with today, Ochibi!" the red-head proclaimed, pointing at his shoes. "Just bought new sneakers!"

"Eiji! Didn't you just buy new shoes three weeks ago? You can't have worn them out already!" Oishi exclaimed.

"But these are the red ones! They look much cooler, and they're lighter, too!"

Sighing, Ryoma headed for the clubhouse. "I'll see you all tomorrow, then."

"See you Echizen!" Momoshiro called out.

Walking past Tezuka on his way to the exit, he caught another sneeze. The bespectacled captain's sharp hearing picked it out anyway. "Gesundheit."

"Thanks." Figures that Tezuka would say that instead of 'bless you' like everyone else.

Chapter 6

Author's Note: Needs more dinosaurs.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 6

It had been another cold night.

When the sun rose, Ryoma wasn't sure if he had been to sleep at all. It certainly didn't feel like it. At times, it felt as though the night was going to stretch on forever. The warm light seemed so alien after so many miserable hours spent trying to stay warm in the cold breeze, curled up on the dewy grass. Just to make matters worse, there had been a brief shower at 3am. Though it was mostly just drizzle, it was enough to dampen his clothes and skin and make the wind sting. He'd very nearly left the deserted park to try and find somewhere else to sleep, but there was no knowing what sort of people might be roaming the streets at that hour of night. They certainly weren't bound to be good ones.

His body felt heavy as he practically dragged himself to Seigaku. Once again, he was forced to wait in the cold for the gates to open. Even the warm shower couldn't entirely chase the chill away this time. It felt as though it had sunk into his very bones and refused to be dislodged.

That morning he was already feeling perfectly miserable, having spent most of the night shivering instead of sleeping. And just his luck, instead of Oishi being the first to arrive after him, it was Tezuka.

If the captain was surprised to see him there, he didn't show it. "Echizen," he greeted neutrally.

"Buchou," he responded automatically, eyes half-lidded and struggling to stay open.

"Oishi mentioned you'd been arriving at morning practice early, but I didn't believe it until now," he said, glancing at his watch. "It doesn't start for another half hour."

"My mother's been messing with my alarm clock," he explained. He didn't feel comfortable outright lying to Tezuka, but what choice did he have?

The captain was staring at him, and Ryoma had the sinking sensation that Tezuka saw straight through his words. He turned his head away and busied himself with checking the strings on his racquet.

Fortunately Oishi arrived not long after, followed by a few of the early bird juniors and then the rest of the club in the five minutes before practice officially started. They'd returned to drills again; apparently being able to practice against the other regulars the day before had been a rare treat meant to stop the complaining.

Morning practice flew by in a whirl. Ryoma stumbled on a couple of his drills, but he was confident that he caught himself before anyone noticed. That confidence wavered when Tezuka stopped him as morning practice concluded. "Echizen, a moment."

He turned and waited as the captain finished talking with Oishi and made his way over to him. Tezuka placed a hand on his shoulder and regarded him with his eternally serious expression. "Echizen, are you unwell? Your stamina was a little low, and Oishi mentioned that you were showing symptoms of the flu yesterday."

Ryoma certainly felt terrible, but in his mind he hadn't felt well for what seemed like a long time. It had been too cold to sleep the night

before, and he hadn't had anything substantial to eat since burgers with Momoshiro a day and a half ago. His body felt clammy and his muscles were weak, but he was rather sure that sleeplessness and hunger were the causes of that. If anything, he was proud that he'd been able to maintain his concentration under such conditions. No, proud wasn't right: he needed to be able to do it, so that if he found himself in a situation like the match he'd had with Ryoga again he'd be able to pull through.

It was highly possible he'd caught a chill from sleeping out in the cold, he admitted, but the last thing he wanted was to have his senpai coddle him. A sore throat and snuffle were unpleasant, but hardly enough to stop him. He wasn't *really* sick. He didn't get sick. More to the point, he couldn't *afford* to get sick right then.

Suddenly, he remembered that Tezuka was waiting for a response. "Just a bit of a sore throat. Nothing serious." He didn't feel like outright lying to Tezuka twice in one day. Besides, with the captain it was always safer to veer towards the truth, so that you had deniability later.

"Have you been to the nurse?"

"It's not bad enough for that. It'll go away in a day or two. If it doesn't, I'll go see the nurse then."

He glanced at the senior's face and had to look away again when confronted with those discerning brown eyes. Ryoma froze when a cool hand made its way to his forehead a moment later. "You do have a slight fever, though. Even if it's not serious, it isn't a good idea to push yourself. You don't have to come to practice this afternoon. Go straight home after classes and get plenty of fluids and rest."

"But-," Ryoma started.

"That's an order. It is far better to miss one afternoon of practice to expedite recovery than it is to push yourself and wind up missing a whole week. Just because the Nationals are behind us doesn't mean

that we can be careless. If anything, we have a reputation to uphold now."

Ryoma knew that trying to argue with the captain would be pointless. "Yes, Buchou," he responded, turning to leave. What was he going to do all afternoon? This meant he wouldn't be able to go get burgers with Momoshiro, either. He supposed he could go to the street courts for a while, but even if he just had to sit on the sidelines and watch he'd rather stick around Seigaku. Seigaku was home, now.

Really, he was just a little sleepy and hungry, and his voice was probably just scratchy from disuse. At the very worst he'd caught a slight chill. That was no reason to prevent him from coming to afternoon practice!

As the youth caught a sneeze, he stopped to ponder his dilemma. Regardless of whether or not he was sick, Ryoma had to admit that he couldn't stand the thought of another night in that park. He'd become used to it rather quickly but it had been getting progressively colder every night. It wasn't appropriate accommodation anymore. It was time to find somewhere else to sleep. Maybe after he left the street courts he could try and look for somewhere a little more shielded from the elements. There were plenty of homeless folk that managed with even less than what he had; surely there were plenty of nooks and crannies nearby where he'd be protected from the wind and could remain undisturbed.

The notion of actually telling someone and asking for help skittered briefly across his thoughts again, but was ruthlessly squashed. He held his chin up determinedly. He didn't need help. He could manage fine. So what if he was a little under the weather? That was easy to handle. The embarrassment of his team mates finding out was the only thing he wouldn't be able to bear.

In the afternoon Ryoma somewhat sulkily bade Horio, Kachirou and Katsuo farewell. Casting a longing glance towards the courts, he made his way out of the school grounds, doubling back after a

couple of blocks to head towards the street tennis courts. If he couldn't attend practice, he'd just find an opponent elsewhere.

To his surprise, both Yuuta and Mizuki from St. Rudolph were at the street courts. He really shouldn't have been so shocked, given that they seemed to hang out there an excessive amount, but he honestly hadn't expected to see any familiar faces during the hours clubs normally operated.

That left him contemplating heading elsewhere, but Yuuta spotted him almost immediately and ruined that plan.

"Hey, Echizen!"

Sighing, Ryoma adjusted his cap and waited as the other Fuji came running over. Mizuki trailed behind him at a more sedate pace.

"What are you doing here? Doesn't Seigaku normally have practice in the afternoons?"

"I could ask the same of you," he replied, not really wanting to admit that he was supposed to be sick and at home resting. He almost snorted at that idea. 'Home'. Seigaku was home now, but then, the others wouldn't understand that.

"St Rudolph finished formal activities for the season this week," Mizuki interjected smoothly, eyes glittering - no doubt he was excited at the prospect of fishing for information. Ryoma folded his arms and trained a bored hazel eye on the rival club's manager. He didn't mind Fuji's brother, but he didn't appreciate the slimy company he kept. "Club members are supposed to self-train during this time."

"Hn," Echizen replied, completely uninterested. Yuuta was staring at him, and he was more occupied with trying to ignore his questioning gaze.

"Echizen, are you feeling okay?" he asked suddenly. "You're not looking too good."

"Fine!" he snapped unintentionally. When the other two tennis players recoiled, he amended, "Just didn't sleep well last night. People have been asking all day. It's irritating."

He was expecting Mizuki to interject with some snarky jibe, but the senior just frowned, grabbing his chin and tilting it this way and that to inspect his face.

"It's no surprise, you look like you haven't slept or eaten for days," he remarked after the annoyed freshman batted his hand away. "Is something bothering you?"

"None of your business."

"Of course it isn't. But it's poor form when a National Champion falls from grace because he isn't taking care of his health. Of course, it doesn't bother me; anything that makes St Rudolph's victory easier is to be encouraged. It would just be disappointing if there wasn't at least a fight when our schools next get to play," Mizuki quipped with a musical lilt in his voice.

Ryoma just muttered a farewell to the younger Fuji, gathered his bags and made way to leave the courts. At first he'd been somewhat hopeful that he might have a decent opponent to practice with, but he wasn't going to hang around with a concerned Yuuta and a nosy Mizuki. Besides, he reminded himself, wherever the younger Fuji hung out the older would almost inevitably follow. Ryoma didn't particularly want to get caught red-handed disobeying Tezuka's orders. The last thing he needed was another lecture on taking care of himself. Who were they to talk to him about that sort of thing, anyway? Considering his circumstances, he was doing a fine job of taking care of himself!

Speaking of taking care of himself, if tennis wasn't going to be an option then it was time to do his homework and start looking for more appropriate accommodations.

The little park that he'd come to think of as 'his' was just as deserted as always upon arrival. Ryoma retrieved his duffel bag from the bushes and set himself up on the park bench to do the day's assigned work. His handwriting was barely legible - it was difficult to summon the energy to even check if his work was correct, much less presentable - but he managed to complete it in a timely fashion. That done, he packed his things and made to leave.

Ryoma paused though, glancing back before stepping out on the footpath. It felt sort of weird. It had only been a week, but in that time the previously unknown park had become so familiar to him.

Shaking his head, he turned on his heel and walked away. What was he thinking, getting nostalgic over a place that only held discomfort for him? Sure it was a private little hideaway, but with the weather becoming so cold so suddenly, the park simply wouldn't suffice anymore. Even if it was still comfortably warm during the days, the past two nights had been bitterly cold, and the thought of a third spent in those conditions left him feeling physically ill. Ryoma had briefly contemplated using what little money he had remaining to purchase a sleeping bag, or maybe a small tent, but carting around his school bag, duffel bag and tennis racquets was difficult enough already. He didn't think he would be able to handle another bulky package without looking like a homeless person.

Which he was, but that was beside the point.

So that left him scouting for somewhere else he could safely spend the night without being seen or stumbled across by anyone, and now also be shielded from the elements. A good deal of the remaining afternoon was spent scouring the area, and he quickly became distressed by the lack of available options. There just didn't seem to be anywhere appropriate. By sunset, Ryoma was starting to dread that he very well might have to spend another night shivering in park.

Feet dragging, he passed by Seigaku again as twilight set in. The school had been deserted for the day; clubs had finished their activities and the teachers were long gone. The metal gates had

been shut, and the eerie silence gave the building a haunted, unnatural feel to those who were used to it bustling with activity during daylight hours.

Pausing, the freshman raised an eyebrow speculatively. The school... that might not be a bad idea. Or even better than the school... the tennis clubhouse. He patted the front pocket of his tennis bag experimentally, relieved to hear a faint jingle confirming the presence of his key ring. Decision made, he hurried around to the side of the school, throwing his bags over the wall and vaulting over easily a moment later. He quickly gathered his things and stealthily headed towards the clubhouse.

The tennis courts were, of course, empty - Tezuka would have called practice to a close hours ago, so even the stragglers were now long gone. Ignoring the pressing silence and the unsettling sensation of doing something bordering on illegal, Ryoma unlocked the clubhouse and shuffled inside, making sure that the door was shut securely behind him. He let out a sigh of relief once inside the familiar territory, looking around himself appreciatively in the dim light. Really, why hadn't he thought of this first? It was a lot safer at the school than out in some public place, and while he'd have to be careful not to be seen going to and from the clubhouse after hours, once he was there he wouldn't be disturbed until morning practice. It had everything he needed, too - toilets, showers, privacy, and protection from the elements. He could probably sleep pretty comfortably on the benches, and recalled seeing an old blanket in storage that the team used for events. Not wasting any time, he headed over to storage 'room' - it was really more of a large closet - where they kept the club equipment. The front was filled with baskets of tennis balls and spare nets, but the back was an interwoven mess of old broken racquets, cleaning equipment, flags and posters from tournaments, and... there it was! Amongst the miscellaneous bits and pieces that had been shoved to the back of storage over time lay an old tartan blanket, neatly folded and half-hidden behind a box of long-unclaimed lost property.

Ryoma picked up the blanket and studied it critically. His nose wrinkled as the scent of old mothballs floated up to greet him, but he ignored it and shook the blanket out, sneezing briefly at the dust it kicked up. It was old, frayed, and smelt musty, but it was also thick, soft, and large enough to wrap himself in multiple times if he wanted.

Folding the blanket back under his arm, he cast his eyes around the storage space again. It would actually be an excellent place to hide his duffel bag while he was at school. He hadn't felt altogether comfortable with hiding it in the bushes at the park, and he'd also been constantly worried about the prospect of rain. No one ever even looked at the back of the clubhouse storage area, and even if they did they would see his name on the bag and return it to him.

Spirits lifted, he immediately took a shower; having been deprived of the one he normally got to have after practice. It was sort of hard to see towards the end of it as twilight faded, but Ryoma was familiar enough with the place to find his way around by feel. The warm shower had made him more drowsy than refreshed, so with nothing else to do in the darkness, the freshman set his bag on one end of a bench, laid out the frayed picnic blanket, and wrapped himself in it.

Unfortunately, exhausted as he was his mind was still alert, keeping him from drifting to sleep immediately. Part of the problem was that it was too early to go to sleep for the night, even if he hadn't really slept the night before. He wound up lying awake for at least an hour wrapped in the moth-eaten old blanket and staring into the inky blackness.

The clubhouse was weird at night. It was oppressively silent compared to what he was used to. At the park, he'd been able to hear distant traffic, crickets, and the wind rustling through the leaves. Back 'home', the house was always filled with one sound or another, whether from ticking clocks, the humming of the refrigerator, his cousin working late in her room or Karupin's feet padding across the floor. Gods, he missed his cat.

Here, though, there was nothing save for the occasional drip from the showers that he would have welcomed if it weren't so inconsistent and damn annoying. Even if it still felt too early to go to sleep, he was worried someone might see if he turned the clubhouse lights on and come to investigate. While he was certain the clubhouse would be left alone, he was pretty sure that Seigaku - like most schools - had a security guard drop around on a routine patrol at least once a night. He'd buy a small torch or lamp tomorrow, he decided. Something small that would let him work on his homework while not lighting up the clubhouse enough to be seen through the windows. It should be possible to get a decent one for just a couple of hundred yen.

With that thought, his exhaustion finally overtook his anxiety and Ryoma slipped off to sleep. For the first time all week, nothing woke him.

Chapter 7

Author's Note: We get a little bit of Tezuka POV at last.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 7

Tezuka Kunimitsu had many duties required of him. He was expected to be a model student, to do more than his fair share of work on the student council, to guide Seigaku's tennis club... and those were just the duties he cared about. There were plenty of other social and otherwise obligations he was expected to fulfil. Achieving good grades came naturally to him, so an average amount of study ensured his position near or at the top of all of his classes. The student council demanded an unreasonable amount of paperwork from him, but he managed to prioritise all of the most important tasks so that they were always completed in time. The responsibility he took most seriously of all, however, was his duties as the captain of the tennis team.

Part of the reasoning for that was simply that tennis was the thing he liked best. Even if he had no immediate ambitions of turning pro, the thought was in the back of the senior's mind that he'd probably like to enter the circuit someday. He had led the club to the Nationals, and they had won. But even though the hardest part was over, he wanted to continue running a tight ship so that the team that succeeded his would have the chance of trying for the Nationals again the next year as well, and the year after that. Just because the tennis season was effectively over until the Spring - at which point the seniors would be handing over the reins to the juniors - didn't mean that he considered his duties done. If anything, he felt more pressure now, as his time

left in the club had been narrowed down to a mere eight or nine weeks until the first snow was expected to arrive.

A good portion of his duties as captain was, of course, taking care of the team. This was why he was currently standing outside the fences of the courts, observing one Echizen Ryoma intently.

The youngest regular was playing a practice match against Kawamura that afternoon - being the smallest member of the team meant that Echizen was still the most susceptible to being blown away by power players. The freshman had plenty of power himself, but Inui was adamant about closing the gap in strength as much as possible, having pointed out that Echizen needed more training than he'd been getting doing drills with the juniors, as he was undoubtedly going to become Seigaku's ace in Tezuka's place. Of course, considering he was managing so well now, the day Echizen hit a growth spurt he was going to become a truly scary player indeed. Tezuka was going to have to work hard to stay ahead.

Still, there had been something somewhat off about Echizen lately. There had been that day about three weeks ago where the freshman had been completely spaced out, but he seemed to be almost back to normal the next day, leading them to assume that he had either just had an off day or had been unwell - his brief fever several days later supported that hypothesis. Indeed, since then Echizen had been playing better than ever, but that didn't change the fact that there was still something odd going on. Echizen's tennis seemed to be better than fine, but Echizen himself... there was definitely something off-kilter there.

Tezuka wondered if he was the only one that noticed. Fuji was normally quite sensitive to any odd behaviour, and Inui had to have at least observed that Echizen had been the first to the courts in morning practice for the past three weeks, despite the fact that he'd been almost constantly sporting bags under his eyes. Momoshiro, however, didn't seem to think anything was odd about Echizen turning down his recent offers of a ride home without fail, atypical though it was. Normally the young regular was well groomed as well,

but lately his clothes had a slightly more crumpled look, even though they still appeared to be clean.

Perhaps most disturbing of all to the captain was the fact that Echizen hardly ever seemed to look any of them in the eye anymore. It wasn't the sort of thing one would normally notice, but Echizen had a particularly intense gaze, and its recent absence was somewhat unsettling. It seemed now that whenever Tezuka made eye contact with his protégé, those golden brown eyes would slide away, almost as though Echizen was afraid that his companions would find some ugly truth in them.

Alone these idiosyncrasies were all harmless and easily explained away. Together, they painted an unsettling picture. Tezuka had started to wonder if maybe it was all in his imagination, seeing as neither Fuji, Inui or Oishi had come to talk to him about it. Maybe he was just being melodramatic; finding deeper darker meanings where there was likely a simple and boring explanation. Either way it left a cold knot of concern in his stomach.

A scuffle broke out between Momoshiro and Kaidoh, pulling the captain away from his musings. Reluctantly, he abandoned his post and made his way to the quarrelling regulars and the trio of freshmen recklessly trying to intervene. "Momoshiro! Kaidoh! Thirty laps!"

Ryoma paused before serving, watching Tezuka head towards the two rivals out of the corner of his eyes. Kawamura used the brief opportunity to yell some taunts in his direction, "SCARED, ECHIZEN?! I'M BURNING, BABY! I'LL TAKE YOUR TWIST SERVE ON ANY DAY!"

"Che," Ryoma tsked, throwing the ball into the air and executing a perfect twist serve. Even if most of the regulars had become somewhat accustomed to returning his signature serve, he'd been increasing the speed and power of it dramatically over the past few days. Kawamura barely returned it, and it left him unbalanced enough that Ryoma could put the point away with an easy forehand winner.

"Game, set and match to Echizen Ryoma, six games to one!" the junior umpire announced. Ryoma exchanged a customary handshake and a few idle remarks with his senpai before heading off to cool down. Practice wasn't yet over, but he'd likely just be doing drills for the rest of it. His stomach growled irritably, and he comforted himself with the thought that he'd at least managed to convince Momoshiro to go out for burgers that afternoon.

The afternoon passed as normal; Tezuka called practice to a close, Ryoma mooched burgers from his senpai, then wandered off to the street courts. They were full, so he went for a lengthy jog instead, coming back to Seigaku once he was certain the rest of the tennis club had left and snuck back into the clubhouse to do his homework.

By the end of his second week of being effectively homeless, Ryoma had found a routine that seemed to work. He tended to wake up when the sun hit his face through the windows in the morning; however much more comfortable the clubhouse was than the park, he couldn't deny that the benches weren't designed to be slept on, which made falling back to sleep nearly impossible. The old tartan blanket was being used sort of like a sleeping bag, to make the bench seem a little softer, but there was only so much cushioning the ratty old blanket could provide before it was no longer performing its primary function of keeping him warm. His homework was now being done at lunchtimes on the roof or in the evenings by torchlight. He tended to go to bed earlier than he would have liked, always nervous about using the torch in the tennis clubhouse lest his makeshift home be discovered. And considering how hard it was to sleep on the clubhouse benches, he tended to get up early and do extra tennis training in the morning, though was always careful to wait until the main gates opened. That routine had been followed almost religiously for the past two weeks while living in the clubhouse. It seemed that the extra training was starting to show, too.

Ryoma trained with the sort of fervour previously reserved for Kaidoh, now. At first he'd justified it as wanting to beat his old man and Ryoga, but in the past few days he'd come to realise that it was

simply that tennis was all he had left. It seemed to be the only thing capable of distracting him from his thoughts - and indeed, playing tennis was the only thing that felt normal to him anymore. In the event of his own family abandoning him, the regulars had become a surrogate family for him instead, dysfunctional as they were; and completely oblivious of it, too.

He didn't like to think about it, though. He didn't want to consider the notion that he could possibly be lonely, or that he might miss having matches in the evening with his *bastard* father. But he couldn't deny that he was impatient for his team mates to arrive at morning practice, and always disappointed when the time came to part ways with them in the evening. He'd even sat and listened to Inui murmur data during the juniors' practice matches a few days ago, going so far as to add his own input when normally he would have wandered off to hit a tennis ball against the wall. But at the same time, he was leery of hanging around them more than often. He was constantly worried about someone finding out his embarrassing predicament, so much so that he couldn't hold anyone's gaze for more than a few seconds, certain he'd find pity or accusing suspicion in their eyes. Especially the captain. It could just be paranoia, but he could have sworn he felt the Tezuka's eyes following his every move the past few practices.

Still, since he'd taken up residence in the clubhouse things were a little easier. He was sleeping slightly better, and getting out of the chilly air in the evenings had been enough to help fight off his impending cold. But even if his accommodations were temporarily taken care of, there were other things to consider. Such as the fact that he was almost out of money; after buying a rail card and a torch, he only had about eight hundred yen left that he was reluctant to spend on anything other than laundry or food. He'd been sponging off Momoshiro and Kikumaru for burgers in the afternoons - something which they'd been complaining good-naturedly about - and taking advantage of Tomoka and Sakuno's generous offers of bento when they brought them, but that was hardly enough to get him through the day. Besides, he could only mooch off his friends for

so long before they started complaining in earnest. Hunger was becoming a constant companion, to the point where it almost wasn't noticeable anymore.

Ryoma sighed, leaning back against the bench. It was dark now, practice having ended hours ago. There was no helping it. He had to find some sort of part-time job - it wasn't something that could be put off any longer. What kind of part-time work could he do, though? Most places wouldn't normally hire a twelve year-old, especially given the limited hours he could work: just evenings and weekends. He had some notion that there might be a minimum age for working, too. Then again, lots of kids did jobs around the neighbourhood for pocket money. He didn't need a lot, really - just enough to keep up with food and laundry. There was sure to be something he could do for that.

What were his talents? He could play tennis, obviously. Maybe he could coach people? It was doubtful that there would be any adults willing to pay him to coach them, but there was bound to be a tennis club somewhere in the area that could use a junior coaching assistant for the kids who played on weekends. At least he'd still be practicing tennis, even if he wouldn't get to play anyone good. And if that didn't work out, he was fluent in English. There were plenty of students struggling in English that could be tutored for a fee. Coaching and tutoring really weren't his kind of thing though, being more suited to someone with Oishi's patient disposition. But considering his situation, he ought to be able to put up with it. After all, coaching didn't necessarily require one be *liked*. Tezuka was a perfect example of that. The senior didn't really care if everyone hated him for being unapproachable or making them endure hellish practices - people still respected him because of his skill, and thus would listen to his few words. Yes, if he used Tezuka as his example, he ought to do fine.

It was Friday tomorrow, and he didn't have any plans for the weekend - he'd go job-hunting then. Find a map or a phone book and mark out all of the tennis clubs. There were bound to be indoor

ones that ran through winter, and they'd probably be looking for extra staff to cope with the increase in demand for enclosed facilities around this time.

It would probably be pretty easy. He'd be fine. He'd show his father. He'd show everyone. He didn't need to be babied, or pitied, and his tennis would be the best.

Ryoma drifted off into an uneasy sleep with the wooden edge of the clubhouse bench digging into his back.

Chapter 8

Author's Note: Rather long chapter! Longest yet I think. In any case, this chapter contains swearing and sexual references, just for warning's sake.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 8

Ryoma irritably stuffed his cap into his tennis bag after the third gust of wind nearly blew it off, and did his best to ignore his rumbling stomach. Friday had come and gone, and he'd just spent half his Saturday walking around to all of the different tennis clubs within the prefecture. His search for work had not gone terribly well, and now he found himself deep in the business district after dark, a good hour's walk back to Seigaku and still lacking in money. After trying a variety of tennis clubs in the district, only one of them had been advertising an open position, and they'd been after a full-time employee. He'd asked at a few other places regardless, and had mostly just been met with blank stares. Normally Ryoma preferred to take advantage of people underestimating him because of his age, but it was a serious issue now.

His stomach growled again, and he had to resist the urge to growl back at it to shut up. So what if he was hungry? There were only a few yen left in his name at this point in time, and he wasn't going to spend them unless he absolutely had to. As it was, it hurt just to sacrifice that measly 100 yen to do his laundry in the Laundromat.

Despondent, he chose an empty street bench across from a massage parlour and sat down, relishing taking the weight off his

feet after spending the entire day walking around looking for work, and hoping a rest might make it easier to ignore his complaining stomach. It was irritating - if he hadn't had to blow off Momoshiro and Kikumaru in order to search for a job he could have at least scored some more free burgers from them. Damn, was he going to have to last all the way until Monday afternoon? Maybe he could drink some of Inui's juice in Monday morning's practice - as disgusting as it was, surely with all of the 'nutritious' ingredients in it he could survive a little longer. Some of Inui's earlier concoctions - before he started to get *really* creative - were somewhat survivable. The data-obsessed senior probably still used those for himself, given that even Inui hadn't managed to stomach some of his latest creations.

Ryoma groaned, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. He must be really hungry if Inui's disgusting juices were starting to sound good.

His eyes snapped open again when he felt a foreign hand settle on his posterior. Shooting to a standing position, he whirled and fixed his glare on the strange businessman he hadn't noticed arriving and sitting next to him. The stranger was tall and lean, looked to be in his early thirties, smelt heavily of cigarettes and his face was covered in stubble. He wore a sloping grin and his white-collared business shirt had the top few buttons undone and a tie only half knotted. An office worker on his way home from work after a few beers?

"Hey, kid, relax," he cajoled, even as he approached again. Ryoma didn't even realise he'd been stepping backwards until his back met with the wall.

The stranger, having him trapped, leaned in and asked, "So, how much?"

"Ha?"

The businessman huffed, looking annoyed. "Don't tell me I picked another rookie. I asked how much for you."

The freshman didn't like how close this guy was getting. He especially didn't like it when the stranger's hand cupped his face, forcing him to meet his eyes. "Don't touch me."

"What, you don't like it? Or is that part of your gig?" Ryoma found himself being pressed against the wall, and was now aware of the man's other hand sneaking its way under his shirt. "You're surprisingly well toned. Okay, then how does thirty sound?"

"Thirty yen?" Ryoma asked, temporarily confused and more occupied with trying to remove the offending hand.

The stranger laughed softly at that. "You're a funny one. No, thirty thousand."

Ryoma's mind froze at that. Thirty thousand yen?

He might've been slow on the uptake when it came to interpersonal affairs, but by no means was Ryoma stupid. This guy wanted to pay him to have sex with him.

He pushed the hand cupping his face away. "You're mistaken. I'm not for sale." This guy should have known better - even if the red light district was only a few blocks away, prostitutes wouldn't wander away from it; nor would they carry tennis racquets with them. On the other hand, with his face so close the scent of alcohol was unmistakable. A drunk and lost pervert. Just great.

The businessman's face darkened at that, and the hand that had been caressing his cheek quickly fisted itself in his hair. The freshman let out a little cry of surprise as his head was jerked back to an uncomfortable angle. "Mistaken? What is it, am I not good enough? Too cheap for you? Let me tell you this, you little tramp, you'll be lucky to get even half that with guys twice my age! You can't pick and choose in this business!" He accentuated his point by slamming Ryoma back into the wall and shoving his left knee between his legs.

"Hey, stop- Hel-!" Ryoma found his voice cut off as his hair was released and that hand wrapped itself around his throat instead. He gasped as the fingers applied more pressure when he tried to speak again.

"Don't be causing a scene now, brat. You'll get in trouble too - aren't you awfully young to be doing this? You even sixteen yet?" Oh for the love of... of all the times for someone to think he was older than he was!

Ryoma scrabbled, trying to throw a punch with his left fist, which was intercepted by the stranger's right hand and pinned against the wall. He choked as the pressure on his neck increased again, right hand reflexively wrapping around the wrist, trying to tug it away so he could breathe freely.

"Come on, brat, stop being difficult. Thirty thousand. And in a proper hotel, too, not one of the trashy ones in this neighbourhood."

"Echizen?"

Ryoma's eyes rolled to the left, searching for the source of the familiar voice. Tezuka-buchou?

The stranger's grip had lessened when he'd realised that they had an audience, and Ryoma used that chance to throw the hardest punch he could with his right arm. He only managed to strike a glancing blow on the man's cheek, but the shock of it was enough for the stranger to drop him and step back. Ryoma practically tripped over his own feet trying to run away, barely remembering to pick up his tennis bag that he had dropped at some point during the scuffle. He came to a stop behind the stern-looking captain, taking a moment to cough and massage his throat. "Are you okay?"

Still coughing, the freshman nodded.

"You fucking little brat! What makes you think you can get off acting like that! You're a shithead, you hear! A slut! A whore!"

Tezuka's frown deepened as he looked towards the still-swearing businessman, who was thankfully keeping his distance despite his angry ranting. "Should I call the police?"

Regaining his voice at last, Ryoma replied, "No, it was just a misunderstanding. Leave it. I'm going." He didn't waste any time hurrying in the opposite direction, barely resisting the urge to run. Tezuka quickly caught up, but didn't say anything until they were at least two blocks away.

Ryoma was dreading the first words that would come out of his captain's mouth, but at the same time, he had no way of sending the senior away. So he just cringed when Tezuka finally spoke in that disapproving tone. "What happened there?"

"Just a misunderstanding," he repeated.

"It looked more like he was about to molest you without your consent."

The freshman tensed, wishing he were still wearing his cap so that he could better hide his face. "Who cares what it looked like? It doesn't matter anymore."

"What are you doing out in this area so late anyway?" Tezuka pressed.

Ryoma resisted the urge to groan. And he'd thought that Oishi was a chronic worrier. "I could ask the same of you," he snapped back, still too shaken from the encounter to worry over appropriate levels of respect. He clenched his fingers into fists, not liking the way his hands were quivering.

"I had an appointment in the area that ran late. I was on my way to the train," came the steady reply.

"Yeah? Well, I was going to the train too," he replied stubbornly. What were the odds of running into his captain then and there? It

was hard to figure out whether to be grateful for that turn of luck or curse it.

Tezuka arched an eyebrow, but thankfully didn't ask any more questions after that. "I'll accompany you to the train station, then."

"Whatever." Ryoma folded his arms and looked away, even if a part of him was relieved to have the captain's reassuring presence at his side. He was starting to understand that pillar business that Tezuka was always going on about - that feeling that there was someone you could always depend on that wouldn't crumble at the first sign of hardship. Ever since he'd been thrown out of home, he'd felt like he'd been floating free without a single piece of driftwood to stop him from drowning. While with Tezuka, though, he could feel that reliable support. It was a shame it didn't linger after the captain had left his presence.

Even so, Ryoma found himself looking back as they walked towards the train station. That man had been willing to pay him a fair amount, and he DID need the money... could he...?

He shivered. No, he couldn't. He was still barely able to suppress his shaking. He'd been scared; something he couldn't bring himself to admit to Tezuka. How stupid to get scared after the fact. It was a lucky thing the senior had come along, or he might have been in real trouble. He'd just have to keep checking out the tennis clubs. There were still at least half in the phone book remaining; there was bound to be something eventually. And if not, he could always try tutoring people for money in English, or doing their assignments if necessary. Who cared if it was facilitating cheating when he was starving?

As though summoned by his thoughts, his stomach growled loudly again.

"Have you eaten yet?" Tezuka asked as they arrived at the train station.

Wordlessly, Ryoma shook his head, not trusting his voice to remain steady with the sudden attack of nerves.

The senior pondered that for a moment, then suggested in a voice that seemed too gentle for his stern face, "Would you like to come over for dinner? My house is closer. You can even stay the night if you want."

Ryoma froze, surprised by the unexpected godsend. "Won't your parents be inconvenienced?" he croaked out, voice barely above a whisper.

"They aren't home at the moment. Your company would be welcome. Eating with other people is always more enjoyable than dining alone, even if my microwave dinners are not particularly delicious."

Still in shock from the unexpected - and decidedly uncharacteristic - offer from the typically aloof captain Ryoma just nodded his agreement wordlessly, happy not to question this brief turn of good fortune.

They boarded the train in silence, Ryoma placing his bag on his lap and hugging it, trying to quell his quivering with little success. He could only hope that it was slight enough for Tezuka not to notice. Thankfully, the rush hour crowds had thinned, so the car wasn't at all crowded and Ryoma had plenty of personal space. Scowling and irritated with himself, the freshman attempted to focus on his more pertinent concerns first. Mostly what he was supposed to do all day tomorrow. Even if Tezuka let him stay the night, he'd probably be booted out in the morning, and that left an entire day to try and fill. Should he go and try the other tennis clubs on his list?

After a short while, Tezuka stood, indicating that they were about to arrive at the stop. Disembarking in silence, they started walking down the dark streets. Ryoma was worried that the senior might try to ask more questions, but it appeared that he was safe for now.

"We're here," Tezuka announced unnecessarily when they arrived at the house. He dug his keys out from his own bag and unlocked the door, holding it open for his guest. Shuffling in with a mumbled thanks, Ryoma stooped to untie his shoes, and cursed under his breath as his fingers fumbled with the laces.

"So why aren't your parents here?" It seemed like asking questions was the best way to cover how long it was taking to perform the simple act of taking off his shoes.

Following after him, the senior explained, "My grandfather recently had some health complications. My parents took him to a specialist hospital in Kyushu."

Echizen made an affirmative noise to confirm that he was listening as he looked around the house, having finally succeeded in removing his shoes. He'd seen Tezuka's residence before of course, but he was still surprised at how large it really was. You could even spy a relatively spacious garden out the back. "Will he be alright?" he asked in a quiet voice. He knew next to nothing about his captain's family, but having a family member who lived with you in hospital had to be stressful.

"I have been assured that he'll be fine, and that it's not a high risk operation," the senior explained absently as he removed his own shoes. "He is old though, so my father decided to accompany him, and my mother went to keep him out of trouble."

"Are you close to your grandfather?"

Tezuka seemed surprised by the question. "I suppose. He's been living with us for as long as I can remember."

"Hn." It probably explained why Tezuka could be terribly old fashioned about some of the strangest things. No wonder everyone mistook him for an adult - he didn't seem to have any influences under the age of 40. "You didn't say anything about it at practice," Ryoma observed.

"It's a family matter, and as I said, the operation is not high risk. There's no point in causing worry."

"And your parents trust you to live on your own, just like that?" Ryoma asked, genuinely curious. Tezuka might've just oozed responsibility, but it was still hard to imagine anyone entrusting the house to *any* teenager.

"They seem to think that since I managed myself in Germany, that I'm capable of managing here," was the somewhat dry response. "Anyhow, you'd better call your parents. Let them know where you're staying. The phone is in the hallway. I'll get dinner started in the kitchen."

Ryoma made his way to the phone placed on an antique-looking coffee table while Tezuka headed into what must have been the kitchen. He wasn't sure if the senior was listening in, so he made a show of dialling, pausing awkwardly as he cradled the phone to his ear. How was he supposed to do this? He liked to think he was decent liar, but he wasn't particularly the world's greatest actor.

Best just to hurry it along. Ignoring the dull dial tone, he started randomly speaking, trying to imagine how the conversation would normally go. "Hello? Old man, it's me. Yeah, I'm at Buchou's. I ran into him in the city. He's letting me stay here tonight. Tell Mom not to worry." Why was his throat closing up when he was just pretending to talk to his parents? It wasn't like they were *really* on the other end of the line. "Yeah, I know. Sure thing. Remember to feed Karupin." God, they better have remembered to feed his cat. It was almost impossible to force the last few words from his mouth. "See you later."

Tezuka came into the living room just as Ryoma replaced the receiver to its cradle. Offering the freshman a glass of water, since it looked like he needed it, he took the opportunity to study the youngest regular on his team a little more closely. The youth wasn't looking well at all.

In all honesty, it hadn't been necessary to invite Echizen over, and it wasn't typically the sort of thing he'd do, but it was an unexpected opportunity to try and discover the cause of the freshman's recent unusual behaviour. Unfortunately, whatever situation it was he'd found his kouhai in had left the young tennis player jittery, anxious, and unhealthily pale, so Tezuka decided that he might have forgo the casual interrogation he'd been planning, even if his concern for Echizen had been continuing to mount for a number of days. Hopefully just close observation for a couple of hours outside of the tennis court would be enough to provide insight into what the issue - if there was an issue - might be.

"You can wait in the kitchen while I finish making dinner if you want," Tezuka offered. "It will only be five minutes."

Wordlessly and with an odd look of estrangement on his face, Echizen trailed after him, slumping almost bonelessly into the closest chair without asking while the senior put dinner into the microwave. "You'll have to forgive my cooking - I didn't get the opportunity to go shopping today and all I have left is microwave meals and reheated rice."

"You cook?" Echizen asked. There wasn't much interest in his voice, but then again, there never was.

"If by cooking, you mean applying heat to food. I had to reach a certain standard of self-sufficiency if my parents were not to worry about me before they left, but I don't do anything terribly fancy." Cooking, Tezuka admitted to himself, was something he was not even remotely interested in, and he usually only went so far as to ensure the food was nutritious and edible - taste never particularly factored into his meal planning. Then again, when cooking for one it rarely mattered.

"Self-sufficiency, huh?" Echizen mumbled under his breath, so quiet that the senior wasn't at first certain he'd heard it. There was, however, more interest present in the youth's voice when he spoke next. "How did you learn?"

"My mother showed me the basics. Almost everything else just involves reading a recipe or following instructions." It seemed an odd thing for his kouhai to show interest in, but who was he to judge? All of Seigaku's regulars had their quirks. The microwave beeped, alerting him that the meals were done. Tezuka let them sit while he extracted the warmed rice from the cooker.

A minute later, he placed two plates of microwave chicken and vegetables with a side bowl of rice down on the table. Normally the senior just ate out of the plastic tray the meals came in, but given that Echizen was a guest it seemed unspeakably rude to eat out of the packaging, even if the freshman was unlikely to notice, much less mind.

They both gave thanks for the food, but Tezuka hesitated when Echizen dug into his meal with an unexpected gusto. There must have been an odd expression of his face, because after a minute or so the freshman grew self-conscious and paused, brow crinkling in thought. A moment later, his eyes dawned with some sort of realisation, and he hurriedly announced, "It's delicious, Buchou. Thank you for going to the trouble."

That was more startling than anything else. Not so much that the first-year was using his manners - for all of his aloofness, Echizen still tended to have better general manners than both Momoshiro and Kikumaru - but more the earnest declaration of approval. Delicious? In mild disbelief, Tezuka took a tentative bite of his own meal, but it was the same slightly dry, bland microwave chicken that it had always been. It was puzzling, but his kouhai hadn't been lying just for the sake of etiquette.

No accounting for sense of taste after all. Inui and Fuji were both proof of that.

Dinner was concluded in silence, though Echizen finished some time before him, even going so far as to accept a second helping of rice. The freshman then gathered the dishes, and without prompting, proceeded to wash them in the sink.

"You don't have to do that, Echizen," Tezuka said when the youth attempted to take his own empty plate. "You are the guest after all."

"And you provided dinner. At least let me clean up."

It appeared that Echizen's pride was at work - the freshman never had particularly liked being indebted to anyone; not even his senpai. Except of course when it involved burgers. Tezuka could respect that, so he didn't attempt to argue the point; even knowing that his mother would have keeled over the spot if she knew there had been a guest in their house doing their own dishes.

Since there were so few dishes, it only took a couple of minutes for them to be finished. Leading Echizen upstairs, Tezuka put his belongings away, saying, "Would you like to use the bath first?"

The captain was puzzled by the gleeful expression that flitted across the freshman's face at those words. He knew that Echizen liked baths, sure, but there was still something odd about it.

That was when he realised. That evening, seeing Echizen eat his meal and show such simple pleasure at the thought of a bath, had seen the most emotion from the freshman for what felt like a long time. Even though the first-year was naturally reserved - much like himself - there had been still been an unnatural neutrality to his expression of late. Even when playing tennis, his usual emotional repertoire of mild boredom to mild amusement had been replaced with a frosty, detached sort of determination. The rest of the time... it was hard to pin what that new default expression was, and that bothered Tezuka immensely.

"Sure," Echizen said softly, obviously thinking that the senior was waiting for a response rather than being lost in thought.

Startled from his musing, Tezuka briskly made his way to the closet, digging around in the back for the smallest pair of pyjamas he could find, eventually extracting a plain green pair that didn't fit anymore.

"Here, you can borrow these. They're the closest I have to your size."

Wordlessly, Ryoma accepted the proffered garments and followed Tezuka to the bathroom, where he pointed out where the towels and soap were and left him to it. He paused outside the door for a moment until he heard running water, then made his way back to his room where he pulled out a book and then promptly sat there not reading it.

What was he doing? Did he really expect that Echizen would suddenly confess all of his problems to him like that? For that matter, Tezuka didn't know for sure that there was a problem to begin with. No, that wasn't true. The more he watched, the more certain he became that something was going on, but he only ever seemed to gain more questions in his quest for answers.

It was tempting to let sleeping dogs lie. But as captain it was his duty to assist his kouhai. Especially since in a matter of months the seniors would be leaving Seigaku, and then Echizen would become the club's lone pillar of support.

Eventually Tezuka managed to distract himself by actually reading the book in his hands instead of speculating on matters he knew little about. A shuffle of footsteps at his door about half an hour later brought him back to awareness, and the sight that greeted him almost managed to make the stoic captain smile. Echizen looked somewhat refreshed after his bath, but his hair was still slightly mussed and the pyjamas were far too large; hanging awkwardly off one shoulder and the sleeves dropping past his hands. Fortunately, Tezuka was able to quell his mirth, as no doubt his kouhai would not appreciate it.

"Bathroom is free," he announced.

Tezuka just nodded, standing and making his way out of the room. "You can help yourself to any of the books."

It appeared that Echizen had taken his offer up when he returned from his own rather quick bath - not wanting to leave his guest bored and waiting - as he was leaning against the foot of the bed, immersed in one of the thicker tomes from his bookshelf. It appeared that the freshman didn't notice him upon his quiet return, so the senior merely resumed his own reading.

They sat there reading for some time in a comfortable silence, until Tezuka noticed Echizen stifling a yawn. Decision made, he closed his book with a snap. "Time for bed." He frowned a moment later. Why did he suddenly feel so old saying that?

Startled, Echizen set his own book down. "There's no need to go to bed early on account of me," he protested.

"I am actually an early riser by nature, so I tend to go to bed earlier also. And in case you hadn't noticed, it's already ten o'clock."

That seemed to surprise the first-year. "I guess I lost track of time."

Tezuka had as well. It was a pleasant change from his usual houseguests, who were typically bored within minutes and complaining that he had no video games or movies to watch. There hadn't really been the opportunity he'd desired to discover what was bothering his protégé - or rather, rival, he sternly reminded himself - but the youth's nerves had apparently calmed from his altercation earlier that day, and that would have to be enough. "You'll have to stand back from the bed. The spare futon is underneath."

"It still surprises me that you have a western-style bed," was Echizen's only comment as he moved to a far corner of the room.

"I grew accustomed to sleeping in one while in Germany," Tezuka explained simply. "My old futon is still in good condition, though. That's what you'll be borrowing." Tugging it out from underneath the bed, the senior briefly left the room in search of pillows and blankets, returning with an armful. It only took a minute or so to finish setting

the futon up, at which point his guest promptly splayed facedown on it.

"Oh wow," Ryoma mumbled, voice muffled by the pillow. "It's so soft!"

The corners of Tezuka's mouth quirked up in what could have been mistaken for a smile at Echizen's antics. "You're the first to ever say that. When Oishi stayed over a couple of months ago, he complained more than once that it felt like he was sleeping on the floor."

"Oishi-senpai doesn't appreciate it enough, then," came the reply.

"If only all of my guests were as easy to please as you. My microwave dinner is the finest cuisine and my spare futon is the softest bed you've ever laid on. One would think that you've been living on the streets." It was a somewhat half-hearted attempt at a joke, but Echizen didn't remove his face from the pillow, fingers clenching the blanket in what looked like a death grip.

"Echizen?" he asked, concerned.

"Sorry, just was drifting off to sleep," the freshman muttered, turning his head to face the other direction.

His kouhai was lying again, he could tell. But what good would calling him on it do?

Chapter 9

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 9

Morning came far too soon as far as Ryoma was concerned.

"Echizen. Echizen!"

"Nnnnhhhh."

"Echizen, it's ten in the morning. I've let you sleep long enough. Wake up."

"Buchou?" Ryoma asked blearily, startled by the bright sunlight streaming through the window. For a moment he was terribly disorientated. At first he thought that he was at the clubhouse, but that wasn't possible because the clubhouse was never this warm and comfortable, and then thought that he had to be back at home and that the past three weeks had just been a horrible nightmare from which he was finally awakening. But then, what would his captain be doing in his bedroom? In the process of dragging himself into consciousness, Ryoma finally managed to recognise his surroundings and recall the previous day. It was like having a bucket of ice water thrown over his head.

"And Oishi said you'd become a morning person, too. I suppose that doesn't apply on weekends?" Tezuka was standing by the window, the mid-morning sunlight catching the tips of hair and giving him something of a glowing halo. Given how the senior had quite literally been his saviour the previous day, it felt a little surreal. As though maybe the scenery itself was mocking him.

Ryoma didn't reply, not really knowing how to respond to that. How could he explain that it was sort of hard to sleep on the clubhouse benches, and that last night had been the first proper night of rest he'd had in three weeks? It felt like three months.

"I expect you'll be wanting to head home. I'll be downstairs preparing breakfast while you get changed."

Ryoma didn't really want to leave, but knew that it would be suspicious if he tried to stay. At least spending the evening with Tezuka had calmed his nerves, centred his focus and settled his tumultuous universe; even if only temporarily. The captain just gave off that air of dependability that made you think that everything would be okay. It would probably be impossible for him to ever explain to Tezuka how grateful he was to him for just being there. He settled for just nodding.

Taking his time getting dressed - as though somehow it would delay his being cast back into the streets for a little longer - Ryoma eventually headed downstairs, where he was greeted without about half of a traditional Japanese breakfast. Tezuka had said that he was nearly out of food, so he'd obviously cobbled it together from whatever was left. Still, the very notion of eating breakfast seemed like such a luxury after the past few weeks of going without that the senior could have fed him sand and it would have been adequate.

They ate in silence, though a few times Ryoma thought that the senior had been about to say something before stopping himself and observing his guest with searching eyes instead. It was Tezuka, though, so he must have imagined it, because the idea of the aloof captain either making idle conversation or hesitating to say something important was ridiculous.

It seemed as though the meal was over too soon, even though it was almost lunchtime when Ryoma found himself standing on the front doorstep. He dearly missed Sunday practice at times like this.

"Would like for me to walk you home?" Tezuka offered politely.

It was hard to stop the 'yes' from falling from his lips, simply because Ryoma didn't like the idea of having to entertain himself for the entire day again, but he knew it would be foolish. "No need. Thanks for your hospitality, Buchou."

"Any time."

With a half-hearted wave, Ryoma trudged down the footpath, forcing himself not to look back. There were still tennis clubs he had yet to try and find work at. On the other side of town, though - he wasn't going to risk going within six blocks of the red light district ever again.

Unfortunately, despite his best efforts, Sunday ended without him finding any work. He was going to have to try again next weekend. Breakfast had carried him through the day, but it was with a heavy heart and empty stomach that Ryoma retired to the clubhouse again that night.

Monday morning practice arrived, and Tezuka didn't say anything other than the usual instructions to him. The week quickly settled back into its odd routine. On Wednesday, Ryoma had been unable to filch any scraps of lunch and Momoshiro had refused to pay for burgers, citing a cut allowance, so he'd been forced to buy a single burger and fries with the last of his money. Eating it had been a slow and torturous affair, and Ryoma had morbidly wondered if that was what eating a last meal felt like. If so, he pitied the criminals on death row because he didn't think he'd ever enjoyed a meal less. He was now officially stone cold broke, and the one burger had barely lasted him until evening.

Thursday saw Sakuno offer him some rice balls at lunch, and Momoshiro heading off after practice to meet with Tachibana's little sister. On the Friday neither of the freshman girls were around, but he managed to convince Kikumaru and Momoshiro to pay for his burgers in the afternoon. The rest of the day faded into obscurity beyond those points. Indeed, Ryoma was having trouble remembering what it was like not to be obsessed with food, or

always jealously eying his classmate's bento and cafeteria lunches. He'd thought he'd been getting used to having hunger as a constant companion, but apparently there were still new heights of it he was yet to experience.

The weekend arrived, and after a lot of legwork the freshman finally found a tennis club that needed an assistant coach for the junior players on Saturdays. The pay was clearly meant to be pocket money, but Ryoma had grown a deep appreciation of the saying 'beggars can't be choosers'. As it was, they had been sceptical of him to begin with - apparently seeking a high school student - but after he'd fired off a couple of twist serves there had been no more questions asked. He used his first meagre paycheck to do his laundry, buy a new rail card and purchase his lone meal for the weekend. It had been alarming when he'd actually had to resist throwing it up afterwards, but he stubbornly refused to give in his to nausea. He had spent good money on that food, and refused to spend any more. Transport costs alone would probably eat half of what he earned at the tennis club as it was, but he'd been subsisting on no money for the past few days, so even a couple of hundred yen in his pocket was better than nothing.

Still, going without food for the entire of Sunday made morning practice on Monday incredibly difficult. It was only through sheer force of will that Ryoma was able to concentrate and not mess up his drills, and even then he couldn't quite shake the light-headedness that followed him throughout the day. Thus lunch saw him nicking scraps from the side of a protesting Momoshiro's plate in the cafeteria.

"Hey, get your own!" the junior laughed, swatting his hand away.

"Mada mada dane, Momo-senpai."

"This is lunch, not tennis!"

Kaidoh hissed at them as he walked past with his own lunch, distracting the power player long enough for Ryoma to steal more

from his plate while the two yelled insults at each other. When the pair caught the eye of a passing teacher, they sulkily went their own ways before they could be reprimanded. Momoshiro angrily chewed on his food, apparently oblivious to the extra missing morsels. "That damn Viper..."

Ryoma didn't comment. With Momoshiro once again paying attention to his meal, he was relegated back to watching his senpai eat with hungry eyes.

"Jeez, Echizen, if you're just going to sit there bored all lunch, don't eat it in class!" The junior was operating under the misinformation that his kouhai had been bringing bento and eating it in class, explaining away the recent absence of his own cafeteria lunch.

Again, Ryoma didn't comment, though he did at least avert his gaze, only to have it wander around the rest of the cafeteria and watch his other classmates eat, which wasn't helpful in ignoring the gnawing discomfort of a hollow stomach *at all*. Momoshiro always got more than enough from the cafeteria; he could at least share with his friend.

Eventually, sitting there watching the other students eat became too depressing so Ryoma stood and made his way to the courts to hit a ball against the wall for the rest of lunch. But after only a few minutes he started to feel weary and sort of cold, even though the weather was quite pleasant, so he stopped and sat down under the shade instead, struggling to find the energy to stay awake.

Afternoon classes passed as normal, and then when practice rolled around Tezuka set up matches between the juniors. Ryoma was nominated to umpire for a change, and the freshman didn't try and protest as he normally would; he was grateful just to sit and keep score. Unfortunately, Oishi was hovering around at the base of chair when he finally descended at the end of practice, making it impossible to avoid the chronic worrier.

"Echizen, how are you feeling?"

Not this again. Of course - he'd forgotten to mutter 'mada mada dane' when the match had finished. "I'm fine, Oishi-senpai." Another lie. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it's just... you're looking a little pale is all. And you don't really look like you've slept well, either."

"Lunch didn't particularly agree with me. Inui's juice was involved." More lies. This one sounded somewhat plausible at least, and the suggestion of short-term-only discomfort and the familiar element of Inui's nauseating juice would be enough to ease the vice-captain's worries.

"Well, don't strain yourself. If you start to feel worse, just let me know, okay?"

"Thanks, Oishi-senpai," he replied tonelessly. He'd have to check his reflection later to see what had Oishi worrying over him.

Practice was called to a close, and Ryoma trailed a hyperactive Momoshiro and Kikumaru for a while, despairing when the junior informed him that he wouldn't be able to go out for burgers for the rest of the week; since his mother was doing some workshop and he had to watch his sisters until his father got home.

They parted ways and Ryoma wandered about aimlessly until the sun started to dip in the sky, indicating it ought to be safe to return to Seigaku without being discovered. On the way, he ducked into a public restroom to see what had Oishi so worried.

When he caught sight of his face into the mirror, Ryoma was startled by the unfamiliarity of the visage that greeted him. He was sickly pale as the vice-captain had observed, and there were deep, dark smudges under his eyes, giving them an unnatural sunken look. His hair was a little messy too, but who knew how long it had looked like that for; typically he'd just been giving it a half-hearted brush after waking up in the mornings. And has his cheeks always been so gaunt? His entire face had gained a sort of permanently pinched

look. No wonder his senpai had been asking questions - as his cousin would have said, he resembled 'death warmed over'. Great. It was a small miracle the other freshmen hadn't started bothering him again, looking like that. Unless maybe the change had been gradual enough they hadn't noticed? That was probably it. It had been a while since he'd last looked at his reflection, after all.

Sighing, Ryoma leaned his forehead against the mirror, enjoying the refreshing sensation given off by the cool glass. The worst part was that there wasn't much that could be done about it, short of taking a bit more care with his hair in the mornings. It was a little unsettling, sure, but he was probably still just adjusting to his new lifestyle. Though it wasn't really new anymore, and he'd considered himself adjusted already.... after he'd been working at the tennis club for a few weeks things would improve, surely. He'd be able to work out a system where he could buy food a little more regularly at the very least.

The freshman took one more glance at his reflection, then turned and left the public restroom, heading back to Seigaku as the sun set.

He was getting sick and tired of always feeling sick and tired.

It had been a month, almost to the day, since Echizen Ryoma had become homeless.

Chapter 10

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 10

Tuesday afternoon found Tezuka Kunimitsu rubbing his eyes tiredly before replacing his glasses. Practice had run late thanks to a few of the juniors' matches that had dragged into tie breaks, and then Ryuuzaki-sensei had kept him back in discussion for ages. When she finally left, he still had student council work he'd neglected for the past week that had to be taken care of. The sun had already set and twilight was well underway when he'd finally started packing up, at which point the last of the teachers had stopped by and given him the spare keys, reminding him to lock up before he left and to drop the keys back off first thing in the morning. It wasn't the first time he'd been the last to leave the school, and none of the faculty ever complained about giving him the keys so that he could leave when he was finished. All the same, Tezuka sometimes wished that they'd just kick him out like all the other students so that he'd have an excuse to ignore some of the council work a little longer. He couldn't even really remember why he'd run for it in the first place.

Sighing to himself as he flicked off the lights, Tezuka headed out of the school, checking that all of the lights were off and relevant doors were locked on his way, even though that wasn't technically part of his duties. The main gates had already been closed, of course, but there was a side gate that teachers and the security guard often used. He made his way there, already mentally running through what homework he had to do when he got home.

Halfway there, he stopped in thoughtfulness. His shoulders felt too light. Ah, he'd left his racquet bag in the locker room again. He would

have to stop by the clubhouse on his way out. The senior sighed to himself again, resisting the urge to rub his temples. It had been a long day.

It was always strange to see the tennis courts so empty and lonely in the evenings, even though he'd seen it that way plenty times before; being captain typically meant that he was usually the last to leave practice. The chill settling into the evening air was a stern reminder that there was probably only another month or so left before the club would stop officially meeting for the year. Somehow, though, Tezuka sensed that the regulars would find some way to keep meeting on a regular basis. They'd gone to the Nationals together after all, and even now none of them were able to abandon the intense training regime they'd placed themselves under during its lead-up. Nor should they, of course. They couldn't be getting careless; winning once and then allowing hubris to take over had destroyed plenty a promising tennis player.

Withdrawing his key, the captain unlocked the door and swung it open in one smooth motion. His arm reached out to switch on the light before stalling in shock.

Was that... Echizen?

It was hard to tell which of them was the more surprised. Although for his counterpart, 'horrified' or 'panicked' might be more appropriate adjectives. "Echizen?"

The startled freshman was sitting on the bench, school bag open next to him and homework laid out on his lap, mouth opening and closing in a manner that vaguely resembled a goldfish. It was quite dim inside the clubhouse - he knew that Echizen had unnaturally good eyesight, but surely he would have noticed how dark it had become? And since when had the first-year started doing his homework at the clubhouse? Had he stayed back to get some help from one of the seniors or something? But that wasn't right - he'd seen Echizen leave earlier, and distinctly remembered locking the clubhouse before going to speak with Coach Ryuzaki.

"It's late," he said finally, deciding that he really didn't care what had kept the freshman there. "Gather your things. It's almost dark, so I'll walk you home." He was sure that Echizen didn't appreciate such an intrusion on his independence, but the facts of the matter were that the other student was still just a first-year and he couldn't allow any of his regulars to put themselves at risk. Especially given that his kouhai seemed to be even more a magnet for trouble than he himself had been at that age. Tezuka's mind leapt unbidden to the memory of chance encounter with Echizen in the business district just a little over a week ago.

To his surprise, though, Echizen didn't move. When he sent an enquiring glance in his direction, the youth just fidgeted, before muttering, "No need, Buchou."

That was a perplexing answer. "The school is closed, Echizen. You cannot stay here."

They stood there in silent stalemate for a long moment, though Echizen refused to make eye contact. Eventually, the younger boy gathered his things, stuffing them haphazardly into his school bag and standing with a slight huff. "Fine." His steps were hesitant as he headed towards the door, though, eyes darting towards the storage area for some reason. Tezuka didn't pay it any mind, instead just closing up the clubhouse behind him. He nearly forgot to pick up his racket bag that had been the original purpose of the trip.

He led the way to the side entrance with Echizen dragging his feet behind him. Once outside the school grounds, Tezuka offered, "Lead the way."

"You don't need to walk me home, buchou. I'm probably going to go hang out at the street courts for a while. Don't let me keep you." The words were casual, but spoken so quietly that the senior had to strain his ears to hear them.

Tezuka really would have felt better delivering the freshman home himself, but the street courts were well-known in the area and he

knew for a fact that many of the other middle school teams hung out there after hours, so Echizen wasn't going to be alone. "I'll walk you partway there, then," he compromised. After all, he'd never actually figured out what had been bothering his kouhai for the past few weeks.

They set off in silence, falling into easy step side by side. Tezuka allowed for several minutes of silence, but when it became clear that Echizen wasn't going to say anything, he asked, "Are classes going well?"

Echizen started, as though surprised at being addressed. "... Yeah."

There hadn't ever really been a question of that, but he had to start somewhere. "And club? None of the juniors or seniors been giving you trouble?" It went without saying that he worried about Echizen, who seemed so like him in so many ways sometimes. He'd done his best to ensure that the youth didn't suffer the same unfortunate fate he had during his first year at Seigaku, but it was impossible to be certain.

"What? No. Club's good. You're leaving behind a weak batch of juniors, though, Buchou."

"Something we are working towards correcting at the moment. They will improve after some match experience," Tezuka replied. The street courts came into sight. He gave a reluctant nod in farewell. "I'll leave you here, then. Take care on your way home."

"... Sure."

As he walked away, though, Tezuka couldn't shake the feeling that he'd overlooked something important. It bothered him. It bothered him that night when he arrived home to the empty house, it bothered him when the chilly Autumn breeze rattled the window panes and woke him up in the dead of the night, and it bothered him so much that he wound up waking up far too early, and so arrived at school when the main gates were still opening.

To his surprise, the centre of his thoughts was setting the nets up on the court when he arrived at the clubhouse. How on earth had Echizen managed to sneak in before him? He hadn't seen the freshman at the gates. "Echizen."

The youth suddenly jerked, nearly dropping the net as he turned around to face him. "Buchou. You're early."

"Not that early, apparently," he replied, dropping his bag and taking the other end of the net.

Echizen just shrugged. "It was cold last night. Couldn't sleep," he said with a yawn.

"Most people sleep *in* when it's cold," Tezuka pointed out.

The freshman didn't seem to have a response for that. And that bothered him too.

Tezuka was able to put the strangeness of their club's prodigy out of his head long enough to focus in class, but found himself observing their youngest regular with a steely eye in practice again that afternoon. Was it just his imagination? Echizen really wasn't looking well, but his tennis was undergoing a spurt of growth at the moment. Obviously some serious practice hours were being put in. Normally, he'd take it as a positive sign - Echizen's moods could practically be measured by the intensity of his tennis - but maybe in this case the obsession was becoming unhealthy.

Impulsively, he called practice to a close earlier than usual, retreating back into the school to try and get ahead on his student council work for a change. It might have just been instinct, but he found himself lingering again, leaving only when the teachers started to close up, and even then he loitered on the grounds far past when any other student would.

It was just a suspicion, really, that led Tezuka back to the tennis clubhouse as the sun was setting.

The courts were deserted, the nets taken down, and the school grounds eerily quiet. However, Tezuka was somehow unsurprised when he opened the door to the tennis clubhouse, and Echizen was there again.

The freshman practically yelped when he swung the door open, half tripping over and very nearly falling into the storage cupboard. He seemed to be dragging a large duffel bag.

Tezuka just raised an eyebrow.

For his part, Echizen seemed to know that he'd been caught out. He looked like he was on the verge of panic, actually, which just made the captain all the more suspicious.

"Echizen... what are you doing here?" he asked in a level voice. Two days in a row... there was a reason behind it, and this time he was determined to find out what it was.

"....Studying!" Echizen blurted, pointing to the books on the benches as though they were proof.

"And you need a duffel bag to do that why...?"

He didn't seem to have an answer for that.

Sighing and pinching the bridge of his nose, Tezuka asked, "Echizen, what are you doing here? The truth, please."

The silence that followed was heavy, but the senior was the patient sort. Eventually, the first-year seemed to deflate, muttering, "I can't go home, buchou."

Tezuka suddenly wished that Oishi was present. This looked like some sort of personal problem - likely Echizen had some disagreement with his family that morning and was punishing them by staying out unreasonably late. They were probably at home, worried sick about him. Still, Oishi wasn't present and as far as he

was concerned, they couldn't have won the Nationals without Echizen, so he forced himself to be patient.

"And why not?"

He didn't like the silence that greeted that question.

"Echizen?"

The youth turned his head away, refusing to meet his eyes. Tezuka resisted the urge to groan - that would be unbecoming of his position. This was why he normally detested dealing with freshmen. They tended to have much more childish and emotive reactions to problems - it was hard to believe that it was a scant two years ago that he was in the same position. Though he had to admit, Echizen still tended to act more mature than most of the juniors, and probably Kikumaru as well. Which was why it was rather surprising that he was having this conversation. Had family problems been the reason for Ryoma's recent unusual behaviour?

"Echizen," he prodded again.

The youth just fidgeted with his cap.

"Are you running away from home?" he asked.

Echizen shrugged, not meeting his eyes again. His posture relaxed a little, though. "Something like that."

"And yesterday?" The silence that greeted his question was all the answer he needed. The freshman had obviously snuck back to the clubhouse after he'd walked him to the street courts and stayed there for the night. He was starting to regret helping Oishi petition Coach Ryuuzaki to give Echizen a key. At the time it had simply seemed to make sense, since the youth would almost certainly become the next captain.

"Get your things," he suddenly ordered.

Echizen blinked, looking a little stupefied, but carefully finished retrieving the duffel bag from the storage room where they kept the nets and balls, then packed his books away into his school bag. Once done, he stood there and stared at him expectantly. The first-year rather looked as though he was about to face his own execution, actually, which was rather unsettling. Tezuka just turned and motioned for the youth to follow. "Come with me."

The two of them left the clubhouse, locking it behind them, and walked to the bus. Tezuka picked up an extra ticket for his companion, and they stood near the door in silence. The senior was acutely aware of a pair of golden-brown eyes fixed firmly on his back, but he was too lost in thought to offer any explanation, merely gesturing when they reached the right stop that it was time to get off.

Tezuka wasn't entirely certain what he was doing as he took the freshman to his house. It was all quite a shock to him, so much so that he wasn't yet able to really process it. His mind was a whirlwind of thought, and though he managed to maintain a calm demeanour on the outside, on the inside he was drowning in a torrent of conflicting emotions - a distracting mixture of concern, irritation and confusion that made reasoning through the situation inordinately difficult.

As they walked the familiar streets, he was vaguely aware of Echizen following him quietly, looking about as lost as he'd ever seen him. No, that wasn't true - the freshman had looked like that for weeks. The expression didn't suit him - it made him seem even younger than what he already was. It made him look fragile. That was the only reason he could think of for why he wasn't marching Echizen back home and delivering him to his parents personally.

He unlocked the door and ushered his guest into the dark house, fingers fumbling as he searched for the light switch. Untying his shoes and leaving them in the foyer, he held out his hand. "Your bags."

Uncertainly, Echizen handed over his bags to the waiting senior, looking entirely as though he had no idea what to make of the situation and so was just going with the flow until it made more sense to him. Tezuka took them and deposited them in his room along with his own. When he returned downstairs Echizen had finished removing his shoes and was standing there awkwardly.

"Come," he ordered, heading into the kitchen. Looking as though he felt terribly out of place, Echizen followed. "Sit."

He set about making tea for himself. "Would you like some green tea?" he asked. "I'm afraid we don't have any Ponta."

"Tea is fine," Echizen responded in a small voice.

The senior prepared the tea in silence, still running through everything in his head. By the time the tea was ready, he thought he at least had an idea of where to begin.

Setting the drink in front of the suddenly very small looking youth, he took a lengthy sip while he regarded him. Echizen was looking terrible, but he had been for some time - his face seemed gaunt and pale, and the dark bags under his eyes had practically become a permanent feature. Looking at it from the new context, though, Tezuka wondered how it was that he could have ever thought it was just all in his imagination.

"Why did you run away?"

No response. Echizen was staring at the grain of the wood in the table as though it were the most fascinating thing in the world. It was hard to resist the urge to sigh. This really was more Oishi's territory.

"Nothing is really achieved by running away, you know. You'll have to face them eventually."

A slight frown was the only reaction.

Tezuka just frowned, setting his tea back on the table. "You can stay here tonight, but after school tomorrow you'll go sort things out. That's more than enough time."

Still more silence. It was vaguely worrying that the youth's parents hadn't come looking for him yet, especially since this would be Echizen's second night away from home by his reckoning, but then, not too many parents thought to look for their child at school when they went missing.

Tezuka shook himself, trying not to let his concern get the best of him. Really, this was a cut-and-dry situation - obviously there was some problem at home, possibly fighting parents or something, and Echizen had run off. Surely after a second night he would have cooled down, started to miss the comforts and conveniences of home, and would be ready to go make up with his family. Maybe if they weren't all part of the same sports club he might be worried about something worse, but no one had spotted any bruises or anything in the locker room so it probably wasn't anything that couldn't be solved with a few apologies and teary hugs.

That was what the Tezuka kept trying to tell himself, anyway. It was sort of hard to convince himself when Echizen still refused to meet his eyes.

Chapter 11

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 11

Ryoma was, quite simply, in a state of panic. When Tezuka had busted him for hanging out in the clubhouse after school had closed *twice in a row*, he was terrified that he was going to have to find somewhere else to stay, or worse, that his secret was going to be discovered. He'd frozen up, not able to believe how much more rotten his luck could possibly get. He was so careful to only go back onto the school grounds after the main gates were closed - what on earth had the senior been doing there that late?

Fortunately, in the end the captain had given him a convenient out. As much as it hurt his pride to say that he'd run away, it was still preferable to admitting that he'd been thrown out of his house. But then Tezuka had dragged him back to his house and promised to escort him home after school the next day. How was he supposed to get out of that?

Tezuka hadn't asked any prying questions when they were heading to school that morning, at least, but Ryoma knew that questions would be forthcoming when he refused to go home that afternoon. He needed a good excuse, some sort of out... *anything* that would prevent his captain from seeing him in such a pathetic state. But nothing came to mind - at least, nothing that his senpai wouldn't see through in an instant.

Needless to say, he wasn't able to concentrate at all in classes that day. At least the captain wasn't the gossiping type. He could trust

Tezuka not to spread around the news that he'd apparently run away from home.

The worst part, Ryoma realised dully during practice that afternoon, was that this now meant that the clubhouse was off-limits for good. Even if he managed to get the senior to forget about the issue and not ask anymore questions, he couldn't go back again, as Tezuka was bound to make a point of checking. Where was he supposed to go next?

As was always the case when worrying about something, the day went far too quickly, and before he knew it, Tezuka was calling practice to a close. Ryoma slowly got changed in the clubhouse, mind racing for some excuse... *any* excuse... that he could give the senior.

"Oi, Echizen, coming for burgers today?" Momoshiro asked, stuffing his clothes haphazardly into his bag. Ryoma watched out of the corner of his eye, trying to contain his anxiety that they'd wrinkle. It was a stupid thought to have - Momoshiro had a mother to iron them for him, it hardly mattered if his clothes wrinkled - but it was distracting all the same.

Realising that the power player was waiting for an answer, Ryoma replied, "Sorry, Momo-senpai, not today." His stomach clenched a little at the thought of missing a free meal, but it couldn't be helped. Then a thought... "Aren't you supposed to be baby-sitting your sisters this week?"

"Ack! You're right, I forgot! I'm already late! I've gotta run, bye!" the junior called, barrelling out the door and very nearly bowling over Kaidoh in the process.

"Fssshuuuu, watch where you're going, idiot!"

"Out of the way! I don't have time to fight with you today, Viper!"

"Echizen," a deep voice commanded off to his right, and Ryoma turned away from the blossoming argument with a sinking stomach. Tezuka was waiting for him with his duffel bag in tow.

It felt like walking towards your own execution. "Thanks Buchou," he murmured automatically as they left the courts.

They walked in silence, each step feeling heavier and heavier as Ryoma mentally exhausted every possible avenue of escape or avoidance he could think of. His dread grew when they started to reach more familiar streets, and a mere five blocks away, settled into defeat.

Tezuka, for his part, was somewhat at a loss for words. He had spent most of his day wondering about the situation with the freshman in the back of his mind, but held fast to his belief that with a bit of time to cool off, Echizen would be ready to return home. The reluctance to do so was understandable; he probably thought he was going to be in deep trouble for running off for two nights. Tezuka felt rather like he was playing the villain in this situation, but held firmly to the belief of showing respect and deference to one's parents. It seemed to be one of the few areas in which he and Echizen had a conflict of opinion.

The area wasn't that familiar to Tezuka, but he was relatively sure they were only a couple of blocks from their destination. His musings were interrupted, however, when he realised that the other boy had fallen out of step with him. Pausing, he turned and looked back, only to find the youth frozen in place on the pavement.

"... Echizen?"

No movement.

"I expect your family shall be cross, but they are more likely to be relieved that you are home and safe. It is best not to put off returning any longer."

Echizen just shook his head mutely, staring fixedly at the ground.

Tezuka sighed. "Echizen, what's the problem? Why won't you go home?"

The silence that followed was more a battle of patience than wills. Tezuka might not have been quite as patient as Oishi, but he had managed to wait two years before starting the path to the Nationals. He had patience in spades.

Echizen finally cracked. "... I can't."

Of all the answers Tezuka had been expecting, that certainly hadn't been one of them. "Why not?"

His kouhai shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Tezuka was beginning to get the sinking feeling that this was not quite as simple as adolescent stubbornness.

"... I lied about running away, Buchou."

What?

"....I was thrown out."

The words came like an unexpected blow to the head. Thrown out? The senior couldn't have possibly heard correctly. He'd never met Echizen Nanjiroh personally, but Coach Ryuuzaki had never said anything particularly bad about him - at least, certainly not anything to give the impression that he was the sort of man to throw a twelve-year old out onto the streets, no matter the situation. True enough, Echizen never seemed that fond of the man in any of the very few instances he mentioned him, but then, Echizen never seemed terribly fond of anybody.

"What happened?"

He was growing used to the pregnant pauses between each of his underclassman's responses. In all truthfulness, his mind was too

busy processing the information to even really notice.

"Do you remember Ryoga? From the cruise?" The youth's expression was pained, and it was obvious that the words were practically being forced from his mouth.

"Of course."

"He came back. We played a match.... I lost."

"What?" It was startling news by itself, but he wasn't sure what exactly it had to do with Echizen being thrown out of his house.

Sighing, the freshman slumped against the brick wall lining the footpath. "You know about my father, right? He quit because he didn't think that there were any worthwhile opponents left to defeat on the professional circuit. Ever since, he's been trying to raise someone who could challenge him."

"You," Tezuka stated flatly.

Echizen didn't acknowledge his statement, instead continuing, "You know, Buchou, when I was six and Ryoga must have been about thirteen, we did play a match. I did okay, but Ryoga let me win, so I never counted it as a real match. Right after that he left. He came back a year later, and we played again. Had me down five games, then he threw the match again. He disappeared afterwards, and this time I didn't see him again until that cruise. It wasn't until recently that I understood."

"Understood what?"

"That it wasn't just a friendly match. We were playing for our position as my father's son."

Tezuka wasn't even capable of saying anything anymore, just listening to tale unfold in numb horror. Some distant part of his mind

noted that it was almost as though Echizen had forgotten he was there - he was talking more to himself than to his captain now.

"It was after that practice - you know, the one where everyone had to run 200 laps because Kikumaru-senpai threw Inui-senpai's juice in Momo-senpai's face?" Of course he did. He'd run the entire club ragged that day. Even Kaidoh, with his inexhaustible stamina, had been puffed by the end of it. "Ryoga was just there all of sudden. He said to me, 'Sorry, but you're old enough to take care of yourself now.

It's my turn.' I didn't really know what he was talking about at the time. He challenged me to a match, and my old man even said that the winner would get to stay, but I still didn't catch on. I was tired and just wanted it over and done with.

The match would have been hard even if I'd been completely fresh. So I lost. And this time, instead of Ryoga being thrown out, it was me." Echizen shrugged. "At least, I think that's what it was. I don't really know anything for sure."

Tezuka was speechless. He'd often thought that the situation with Ryoma's brother had been rather strange, but he'd never imagined something like this. What kind of parent could DO that to their child? Surely something like that would be illegal?

Then another detail of the story clicked into place. "Wait... that practice was a month ago! Where have you been staying since then?"

Now Echizen was *really* looking uncomfortable. Comprehension dawning, he glanced back towards the school. "You mean to say that you have been staying at the clubhouse?"

"I slept in a park the first week," he muttered. "But it started to get cold."

In a *park* ?! One of his regulars - a freshman at that - had been sleeping in a *park* like a homeless person and no one had even noticed? He'd thought staying in the clubhouse was bad enough - that was completely unacceptable!

Stirred into action, Tezuka placed a hand on Echizen's shoulder and gently steered him back in the direction they'd just come. "Buchou?"

"Let's go," was all he said in reply.

It changed the situation completely. The easiest solution right then and there would be, of course, to march Echizen back home and talk with his parents; to gauge the situation for himself just to make sure it wasn't adolescent melodramatics. But Tezuka didn't really believe that they were melodramatics anymore. Obviously there was more to the situation if Echizen had gone so far as to suffer on the streets for a month, rather than just run away as he'd first said. It might have been a different story if he'd been staying at Momoshiro's house and in relative comfort, but no one would endure the hardships of living in a park if there were an acceptable alternative.

No... he couldn't force Echizen to return home in that sort of situation. If he'd really been thrown out...

Tezuka's thoughts were in turmoil as he silently led the way back to his house. Echizen followed him quietly with a confused expression on his face. They didn't speak again until half an hour later, when they were standing in the foyer of his house once again.

"Bags," Tezuka ordered, feeling a sudden spike of déjà vu as Echizen reluctantly handed them over. "I'll put these upstairs. Take a seat in the kitchen. I'll be there in a moment."

He didn't know what he was doing, really. All he knew was that he couldn't let one of his team mates sleep on the street. Especially not when that team mate was only a first-year.

Echizen was slumped the table, hands stuffed into his pockets, seeming to try and shrink in on himself. Tezuka just quietly made them some tea - suddenly wishing they had some Ponta in the house for his guest, as that was sure to be more welcome - and sat down across from him, taking a deep sip of the hot liquid as though it might help. It didn't. The second cup was left ignored and untouched.

Finally, he broke the silence, voice quiet as though not to disturb his edgy guest. "You didn't say anything. Not even when you stayed over last week. Did you just pretend to call your parents?"

Echizen turned his head away. That was the only answer he needed.

At least now he knew why the youth had been so impressed with his less than stellar home cooking and old lumpy futon. Even the floor of his house had to seem like luxury after sleeping on the cold clubhouse benches. Tezuka felt almost physically ill at the thought. It was hard to wrap his head around the situation; it was so unbelievable. This sort of strange, cruel circumstance didn't happen to people he knew. It was something that only ever happened to strangers.

"Why didn't you tell anybody?"

Echizen sat there for a long moment, and when it became apparent that Tezuka was willing to wait for an answer, he finally growled, "What was I supposed to tell them, Buchou? Could you just go up to anybody and admit that you'd been thrown out of your own house because you lost a tennis match with your long lost half-brother?"

"Regardless, you should not be sleeping on the street."

Echizen fiddled for a moment, before confessing in a small voice, "It would just create a fuss, and it's not like telling anyone would make it better."

"But at least you would not be bearing the burden alone," Tezuka pointed out.

"But... if people became involved... I don't have any other family here. I'd probably get sent away, back to America or out into the country. I wouldn't be able to keep going to Seigaku anymore."

That was something that the senior hadn't considered, and his blood ran cold at the thought. Echizen could be forced to leave Seigaku?

"Please, Buchou," Echizen asked, eyes pleading. "Please don't tell anyone."

Tezuka stared at his kouhai, unable to comprehend the fact that Ryoma was practically begging him to keep his secret. Echizen didn't beg. The only time the freshman even came close to pleading with him was when he had asked to be on the Junior Invitational Team.

He couldn't refuse his kouhai when he was under such obvious distress, even if the rational part of him insisted on taking care of the matter in a proper fashion. "Very well, I'll keep your secret. But if you won't tell anyone else, I insist that you are honest with at least me." And in all truthfulness, he didn't want the freshman to leave Seigaku either. Even if he himself only had another couple of months before graduation, Tezuka couldn't imagine the tennis club without Echizen anymore.

Echizen nodded mutely, then hesitantly asked, "What now?"

It was a good question. "Tonight, you are going to eat a full meal, have a hot bath, and go to bed early. You can stay here on the spare futon for a while. We can figure out a longer-term solution later. In fact, go run the bath now. I'll start preparing dinner."

Echizen quietly left the table, heading up the stairs. Tezuka stared after him for a long moment. It felt like some bizarre dream - this sort of drama just didn't happen to people he knew, and now that it had the senior was left uncertain of how exactly to deal with it. The only thing he was really clear on was that he couldn't possibly allow Echizen to continue to deal with it alone. How on earth had the first-

year managed for a month? How had he pulled it off for that long without anyone finding out?

Those questions would have to come later, he decided, moving about the kitchen to prepare a big meal. The top priority was making sure that his charge had everything he needed. Echizen looked like he hadn't been eating or sleeping properly, which was understandable given the situation. Once that was rectified, then they could make some move towards sorting the whole affair out.

Chapter 12

Author's Note: So we start seeing the inevitable hints of TezRyo. I swear, I can't resist it. I am trapped in the Tezuka zooooooooone.

Just two chapters today. Hopefully three tomorrow. Holidays are ending, so not sure after that.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 12

On Thursday morning they wound up being late to practice, since Tezuka hadn't the heart to wake Echizen up until the last possible moment - even then he'd insisted the freshman eat all of the breakfast he'd prepared. If Oishi was surprised at the sudden shift in both the captain and youngest regular's arrival times, he didn't show it. The advantage of being captain was that no one could assign him laps if *he* were late.

It was a peculiar situation, and for once in his life, Tezuka found himself at loss of what to do. He felt that he ought to be doing *something*. After all, the responsibility for his kouhai's wellbeing currently lay with him, as the adults around the youth had apparently failed him. As such, the senior found his concentration wavering throughout the morning drills as he pondered Echizen's dilemma.

Absently, he called practice to a close a few minutes before classes were due to start, and then proceeded to spend most of his morning lessons only half paying attention. Fortunately, no one seemed to notice his distraction, so he was able to consider some other courses of action uninterrupted.

There was no problem with the short term. The only real difficulty appeared to be food and accommodation, and Tezuka had no qualms about lending Echizen his spare futon and feeding him - after all, he was cooking for himself at the moment anyway, one extra mouth was not that much more work. The only thing that really had him concerned was the fact that it had already been a month. That did not imply a simple solution to the matter in the near future, and certainly nothing would change without some sort of positive action from another party. There was also the matter of the fact that, despite how well he'd managed, the freshman had damage to repair. Echizen had worn himself physically and emotionally into the ground, but was clearly both too stubborn and too prideful to have even noticed. He'd have to keep a close eye on the younger boy.

Barely suppressing a sigh, Tezuka forced himself to focus on what the teacher was saying - even if he already understood the work, it was disrespectful to daydream during class. It was so difficult to concentrate, though; school hardly seemed important in light of his kouhai's situation.

The whole issue would be a great deal simpler if he hadn't already promised Echizen that he'd keep his secret. Realistically, it was a highly personal issue and it wasn't his place to tell anyone, but if some of the other regulars were at least involved... what difference would it really make, though? Everything was up to Echizen. The most he could theoretically do for the time being was make sure that the first-year was taken care of.

With that thought in mind Tezuka stood as the bell rang for lunch and immediately headed towards the Echizen's classroom. Seeing as all four of the freshmen that had initially joined the tennis club were in the same homeroom, it had been easy to remember their class number.

"Eh? Tezuka-buchou?! What are you doing here?" Horio exclaimed loudly when he entered.

"Looking for Echizen," he replied, brown eyes sweeping the room efficiently. A number of the girls in the room were tittering at his arrival, and he was drawing quite a few curious glances.

"He's probably up on the roof," Kachirou piped up. "I thought I saw him heading that way earlier."

He nodded his thanks and left the room, ignoring the speculative murmurings of the students behind him. Really, he should have checked the roof first; it seemed that Echizen could nearly always be found either there or on the tennis courts.

Sure enough, Ryoma was stretched out on his stomach under the sun, book open in front of him. Was he doing his homework in the middle of the day? "Echizen."

The freshman snapped his book shut and sat up. "Buchou."

"Lunch. Have you eaten?"

The uncomfortable look on his kouhai's face confirmed that suspicion. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Have you really been subsisting on just afternoon burgers with Momoshiro?"

"Sometimes Ryuuzaki brings bento. Other times I've been stealing scraps from Momo-senpai," Echizen muttered.

That explained why Ryuuzaki's granddaughter had been so cheerful lately, he supposed, watching their afternoon practice with doey eyes almost every day of the week. Still, he felt vaguely horrified at the notion that his team's youngest player hadn't even been able to get enough to eat, and had to resort to *stealing scraps*.

He reached over and pulled the freshman to his feet. "Come."

"Where?" Echizen asked, stumbling after him and scrambling to gather his books.

"I normally buy a cafeteria lunch. I'll get extra - you can share mine."

"But Buchou-"

"It's unacceptable that you survive on so little food," he interrupted. "Until you tell someone else about your situation, you're under my care and I will not have you starving."

"I'm not hungry," the first-year protested.

"I doubt that."

"No, really, Buchou," Echizen insisted, making to tug his cap down over his eyes before obviously remembering that he wasn't wearing it. "I had a big dinner last night and you gave me breakfast as well this morning. I'm not hungry at all."

Tezuka paused, staring at his kouhai. Realisation set in. Of course... if Echizen really had been surviving on scraps for a month, that was more than enough time for his appetite to diminish to the point where eating a full three meals a day would feel like too much.

That didn't mean it was okay, though. "That is exactly why I must insist. You have to resume a regular eating pattern. You don't have to eat a lot - but you will eat." He grabbed Ryoma's wrist, not trusting that the first year wouldn't try and abscond on him, and started dragging him to the cafeteria. They gained a few curious glances in the hallway, but no one dared asked any questions of the stern captain and his apparently unwilling tag-a-long. Tennis business, they figured.

Only when they reached the cafeteria did Tezuka release him. By then, most of the other students had already fetched their food, so there was no line. Tezuka collected his lunch, getting an extra large serving, and headed over to the usual table where the senior regulars usually sat during lunch. Echizen reluctantly followed, slouching into a seat on the end.

"Oh, Echizen is joining us today?" Fuji asked pleasantly as Tezuka set down his tray.

"How very unusual," Inui commented from across the table. "There is only a 0.5 chance that Echizen would willingly join us for lunch. 35 of the time he eats with Momoshiro, 15 of the time with the other freshmen and 40 of the time he either goes to the roof or the courts."

Ryoma sulkily started eating the rice ball Tezuka quietly handed him. He hadn't been lying - he really wasn't hungry after both dinner and breakfast, but he was quickly discovering that the captain could almost match Oishi's level of mothering under the right circumstances.

Even though his presence there was a novelty to the seniors, they didn't make anything of it. In fact, it felt a lot like any of the regular club outings. Ryoma sat on the edges and didn't really contribute, aside from when Kikumaru or Oishi prompted him. Tezuka was as still and silent as a stone, leaving the idle chatter to the others and providing a useful barrier from their curious gazes. Inui scribbled in his notebook even during lunch. Ryoma idly wondered how many pages the data-gatherer went through in a week.

Lunch ended and Ryoma returned to class without incident. He spent English staring out of the window, but actually managed to focus properly in maths. Once classes were finished for the day, it was out to practice, where things were business as usual on the tennis courts. Ryoma couldn't help but keep glancing at the captain though, uncertain whether or not he was going to do anything different now that he knew his secret. He was somewhat dreading the end of the school day. Tezuka might have promised to keep his confidence, but it was clear the senior thought that others ought to be informed. What if he went over his head and told someone else anyway?

Practice itself held no surprises, though as it was ending Tezuka caught him before he could head back to the clubroom with everyone else. "Echizen. I have to speak with Ryuuzaki-sensei, but-"

"You're not going to tell her, are you?" he interrupted, feeling certain that his fears were going to come true.

"No. I said that I would keep your confidence until you feel ready to tell people yourself," Tezuka assured him. Ryoma relaxed. He hadn't wanted to doubt his captain's word, but at times the senior felt more like an adult than a fellow student. It was hard to believe that he would side with him, rather than his father. He had been nervous all afternoon that the captain would march him back to his house and demand a meeting with his parents, or organise a conference with his homeroom teacher or something. It was stupid, though. Tezuka was a good senpai; even if sometimes he looked ten years older than what he was, he was still a teenager who understood the world from a teenager's perspective. Ryoma just had to keep reminding himself of that. "I was merely going to ask how long you were planning to be out with Momoshiro, so that I would know when to expect you back."

It was a weird feeling, hearing those words. The sensation was similar to receiving a warm hug after being out in the cold rain. Ryoma didn't know what he'd been thinking to make those words so reassuring. It wasn't as though Tezuka was going to throw him back out on to the streets all of a sudden - his bags were all still at his home, just for starters - but a part of him didn't really believe that he'd get to sleep in a soft bed, use a proper bathroom and eat a full dinner three nights in a row. Apparently over the course of the past month he'd become accustomed to a bare-bones lifestyle. Being thrust back into the lap of luxury felt almost illegal, like sleeping on the fancy display beds in a furniture store while wearing your shoes. You kept expecting some disapproving sales person to come and ruin the illusion at any moment.

It would be weird, though, knocking on the door like that. More intrusive than just following his senpai home. "I'll wait," he blurted.

Tezuka raised a single brown eyebrow elegantly. It seemed like everything the senior did was understated and elegant; it was amazing no one really resented him for it. Frustratingly, he was the only person ever able to make Ryoma feel awkward. "Are you

certain? Even if it is only a few trivial club matters, it could still take a while."

"It's fine. Momo-senpai is babysitting his sisters this week anyway." And burgers were expensive, too. Ryoma was going to stubbornly cling on to his few hard-earned yen for as long as possible. When Tezuka still seemed dubious, he added, "I'll practice some hitting against a wall or something. Don't hurry on my account."

"If you're sure then I'll meet you back here."

Ryoma nodded and wandered off to hit a ball against the school wall, not wanting to wind up getting questions about why he was waiting around from the other club members. He did that for a good half an hour, losing himself in the familiar rhythmic motions while he turned the past twenty-four hours over in his head.

It had been hard to tell which of them had been more shocked the day before. Despite spending an entire day contemplating it, Ryoma hadn't been able to think up a plausible lie, and had finally been forced to come clean. He still wasn't sure how he felt about being found out. Certainly, he'd been feeling miserable at the time, but there were so many questions and uncertainties now. Ryoma hadn't thought that anyone would ever have to find out - he'd been so *careful* - so he'd never once considered what to do if he was. Which left him where he was now.

At least Tezuka seemed willing to keep his secret. And it was really nice that the captain was letting him stay at his place, though Ryoma held no illusions about its permanency. Given the senior's disposition, it was rather amazing he hadn't been sat down, interrogated, and shipped off to Momoshiro's - or worse, back 'home' - immediately, but it was probably only a matter of time.

Even so, half an hour later when Tezuka finished up, they didn't talk; merely walked to the bus and returned to the house in silence. Once there, the captain started doing his homework, suggesting amicably that the freshman do the same. Ryoma finished first and sat there

reading, not wanting to bother the senior in his studies. When it was starting to get dark, Tezuka retreated to the kitchen to make dinner; Ryoma followed and watched his every move with hawk-like eyes. The fact wasn't lost on him that he'd probably need to know how to do these things now, and the young tennis player didn't want to get caught out like he had been at the Laundromat again.

They sat down to eat dinner, and halfway through, Tezuka finally started asking questions. Ryoma knew it was coming after the night before, and tried to answer as best he could out of politeness more than anything else, but it was still hard to bring himself to speak in detail of the past month. It was embarrassing, and it had been something he'd expected to keep secret for... well, forever. Never mind the impossibility of that notion. He respected the captain, though, so he tried his best to give at least some sort of answer, even if it was deliberately vague.

"So, we have established already that you have not been eating properly lately. Can I assume your recent early arrival time to practice can also be attributed to your situation?"

"....Yes."

Tezuka sighed, and expounded, "Have you been sleeping?" It was said in a tone of voice that suggested the senior already knew the answer, but wanted to hear it straight from the horse's mouth.

"....As well as can be expected."

"Meaning," Tezuka prompted.

Ryoma crossed his arms sulkily and admitted, "The park and clubhouse weren't very comfortable."

Tezuka remained silent.

"....And there was always lots to think about," Ryoma reluctantly added, sensing the unspoken prompt. "... And it was cold." He

shivered involuntarily at the memory. That ratty old picnic blanket had been more than enough for the first week, but as the evening temperatures continued to plummet in the lead up to winter, even that couldn't always keep out the chill.

"I see. How have you been managing for other necessities? Money? Laundry? Homework?" Figures Tezuka would consider 'homework' among the necessities.

"I had some money saved, but it didn't last very long. So I got a part-time job."

"Doing what?"

"Tennis club. Assistant coach for a kid's class."

"That wouldn't pay very much."

"I'm underage. It's better than nothing."

Tezuka let out a small 'hm' at that and let the matter drop. "And..."

Sighing, Ryoma continued, "I used a Laundromat to wash my school uniforms. And I did my homework at lunch or at the park."

Crossing his arms, Tezuka sat back and regarded him for a long moment. Ryoma spent a moment wondering what the senior would look like without his glasses, then wondered how strong the prescription was and how anyone with bad eyesight could be capable of discerning the spin on a tennis ball with such apparent ease.

The captain's voice jerked the youth back to the present. "I suppose that's enough for now. I'm still not pleased you didn't seek assistance from anyone over this. Even if you felt like you couldn't go to a teacher, you should have certainly let one of your senpai know."

"....You qualify as my senpai, don't you Buchou?"

"And I only found out through chance. How long would you have continued on as you were had I not stumbled across you in the clubhouse?"

Ryoma didn't answer. And Tezuka found himself thankful that he *had* found his kouhai when he did, because it was perfectly clear that Echizen would never have come to him - to *anyone* - on his own.

Echizen seemed to have organised himself remarkably well, though - better than he expected. He'd even managed to procure a small source of income - no easy feat for a middle-school student - and had managed things like his own laundry while still balancing tennis and school. Tezuka was mildly impressed. Pride seemed to have helped keep the youth's head above the water... but it was that exact same thing that had stopped him from swimming to shore.

Realising that he'd been silent for some time, Tezuka stood from the table. "I don't have any problem with you staying here for the time being. But I do suggest you think about telling someone else about this."

Ryoma stared at him with strangely expressionless golden-brown eyes. "Okay, Buchou. Thank you."

That was when Tezuka knew, that for all of his misapprehensions about not informing an adult or going through what ought to be proper procedures, it wouldn't make a difference. He'd find himself doing whatever those eyes asked of him anyway.

Chapter 13

Author's Note: This chapter makes me relieved that I decided against chapter titles.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 13

Tezuka had fetched Ryoma for lunch the next day as well, and that evening had asked only a few more cursory questions, most of which he had avoided answering. By the end of the week, to avoid having to put up with his classmates asking annoying questions later, the first year just met the captain in the cafeteria himself. Inui kept muttering about how terribly in error his data was, but other than that the other seniors didn't seem to mind his presence, even if they found it a little unusual.

Friday afternoon practice, however, brought more surprises. Ryoma had glanced up after finishing his drill, and had been startled by the sight of his cousin - that was his cousin, Nanako, right? - standing under a tree outside the courts. The shock was bad enough that he nearly dropped his racquet. At some point, he'd practically forgotten she even existed.

Tezuka nodded to him when he glanced over, giving his permission for him to go speak with her before Ryoma even had to ask. Leaning his racquet against the fence, he made his way to where she was waiting outside, ignoring Horio's voice behind him complaining, "Eh? Why does Echizen get to skive off practice?!"

He didn't bother with any particular greeting, instead just stopping and standing awkwardly several paces away. They were far enough from the tennis courts that he was confident no one would overhear their conversation.

"Ryoma," she greeted him with what looked to be a relieved smile.

He didn't say anything; too busy drinking in the sight of a friendly familiar face. Had it only been a month? It felt like he hadn't seen his cousin in *years*. Ryoma hadn't really thought about it, but a small part of him had missed seeing Nanako. Really, upon reflection, he saw more of her than he did of his mother, and she often went out of her way to cook him a Japanese-style breakfast, even though she was under no obligation to do so.

After a moment, he finally asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, of course!" she burst out, then withdrew a little, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry... but when I got back and heard what had happened... This was the first place I could think of to check." She nodded towards the tennis courts. "I didn't even know if you'd still be going to Seigaku."

"Che, where else would I be?"

"I... I didn't know. That's why I was worried... I couldn't stand the thought of not knowing where you might be if you weren't here," she admitted, then hesitantly ventured, "Do you have somewhere to stay?"

"Yeah, Tezuka-buchou is letting me stay with him at the moment." No point worrying her by mentioning his time in the park or clubhouse.

She smiled again - that worried little relieved smile that he was quickly starting to hate. He didn't want to throw his cousin into the middle of all of this, but at the same time a part of him was immensely happy that there was someone from his family that actually missed him.

"So, what exactly happened? From what I managed to get your father to tell me, he threw you onto the streets for something as ridiculous as losing a tennis match?"

Ryoma's first instinct was to correct her by saying that tennis was never ridiculous. In the end, though, all he said was, "That's pretty much it."

She sniffed. "Pitting a twelve-year-old against someone who's practically an adult? Uncle has gone insane. I keep telling him to give up and go bring you back, but he's being stupid and stubborn - doesn't want to admit that he's even done anything wrong! Keeps talking about how it's all for the sake of tennis! He's always been far too irresponsible for someone his age, but I thought he at least had more common sense than this! What kind of parent-"

"No," Ryoma cut her off. "Just... don't. Who knows what's going through that old man's head?"

She stared at him in silence for a long moment, before thrusting an envelope awkwardly at him. "Here." Cautiously, the freshman took it and flipped it open, peeked at the contents curiously, then almost went weak at the knees at the sight of all the money inside. That had to be at least 50,000 yen! "I'm not going to sit back and just watch this forever, Ryoma, but this is all I can do for you right now."

"I have a part-time job," he said, more out of formality than anything else. Even though he desperately needed the money.

"You're only twelve," was her surprisingly acidic response. "I seem to be the only one who remembers that. Whatever you're doing, it can't possibly pay enough."

"Almost thirteen," he muttered a little petulantly.

"As if that makes a difference!"

He blinked, and then quietly pocketed the money, tugging his cap down over his eyes as he did so. "I... Thanks. It'll really help."

Ryoma was surprised a moment later when Nanako suddenly pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. He blushed faintly, embarrassed and hoping that no one on the courts was watching. "Maaa, Nanako...."

"I'm sorry... I just... you standing there so calmly.... I can't imagine how it must have felt, suddenly cast aside like that for your brother...."

"Ryoga's not such a bad guy. Besides, the exact same thing happened to him when he was my age."

"Your father is lucky I haven't gone to the authorities yet!" she snapped, finally releasing him from the embrace. Her words were harsh, but her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"Don't. I don't want that sort of attention. And it wouldn't really solve anything," Ryoma insisted. "I'll just practice, and a year from now, I'll come back and beat both Ryoga *and* that old man!"

"As if I'm going to wait a year! But I won't go to the authorities if you insist. I'll keep talking to them, though - both your father and your brother!"

He didn't want to ask. He was afraid of the answer, but the words slipped from his lips anyway. "And... mother?"

Nanako's lips puckered a little at that. "I heard from Ryoga that Aunt Rinko and your father had a terrible row over the whole affair, but that man wouldn't budge. Ryoga said something to her, I think, and she eventually relented. She didn't want to force you to return when you might not feel welcome anymore, but said that if you asked, she'd make certain you could come home."

If *he* asked?

Why hadn't she come for him? Why did it have to be up to him? It was true - returning home would be uncomfortable; it wouldn't be a home he could feel relaxed in or take for granted anymore - but if his mother had asked....

If she'd asked, he'd have come home in a heartbeat regardless of anything his father said, Ryoma realised. If any of them had. But none of them had, and now it was too late. Even now, his well-meaning cousin wasn't asking. They all knew that once the wheel had been set in motion, there was no pulling it back. Ryoma had too much pride, and his father could be just as stubborn as he was.

Nearly choking on the words, he blurted, "I- I have to get back to practice. Thanks very much for the money. It was... it was good to see you." At that, he turned and practically fled back to the clubhouse - forget practice, he wasn't stepping back onto the courts until he regained his composure.

On the courts, Tezuka watched out of the corner of his eyes with some concern as his kouhai practically ran back to the clubhouse. He didn't recognise the woman, but figured she must have been related to Echizen in some way, given the youth's reaction when she first showed up. His mother, maybe? No, she looked too young.

He'd originally planned to call practice to a close around then, but let it run a little longer to give the youngest regular some more time to compose himself. The woman stood there uncertainly for a minute or so after Echizen had disappeared into the clubhouse, before turning and walking demurely away. It was hard to resist the urge to go over there and talk to her himself, to find out what had apparently upset Echizen so, but none of the other club members had paid much attention to the exchange, and it wouldn't do to give them any reason to gossip about it.

After what seemed like forever, the freshman returned to the court to fetch his racket. As he did so, Tezuka called the practice to a close. Fortunately, Coach Ryuuzaki wasn't there that day, so he and Echizen only had to linger until everyone had left before they could

make their way home. Ryoma spent most of the walk to the bus staring at his shoes.

Eventually, the senior's curiosity got the best of him and he broke the fragile silence. "Who was that?" There was little point in beating around the bush.

It took a long time for Echizen to respond, and his voice was practically a whisper when he did. "My cousin, Nanako. She just got back from a trip out of town."

Tezuka blinked, surprised. That at least explained who she was. "What did she want?"

Echizen shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "To check on me. Oh, and she gave me some money too."

"That's all?" He'd seen the heartfelt hug the woman had enveloped the boy in.

"It was a LOT of money."

"She didn't want to take you back home?" Tezuka pressed. He'd been hopeful for his kouhai - when he'd heard the woman was a relative - that maybe things were on the way to being sorted out and the youth would be able to return home.

Echizen's gait slowed briefly, before speeding back up again. "No, she didn't ask."

Not such good news then. Even though Tezuka wanted more details, he recognised that the question had upset his kouhai, so didn't push it.

They didn't talk about the matter again that evening. Echizen seemed troubled so Tezuka left him alone. They did their homework, even though they both theoretically had the entire weekend to work on it, ate dinner, and Tezuka read books in his room while his guest

stayed downstairs watching some tennis matches on tape. After a while the senior joined him, and then eventually they wandered off to bed.

Tezuka lay in bed awake for a long time, staring into the darkness of his room. It was getting quite late, but for some reason he just couldn't fall asleep. Thankfully it was a Friday night and there wasn't any school the next day, so he could always sleep in. It was still annoying though, just doing nothing while wide-awake. In this sort of situation he'd normally turn on a light and read a book until he felt sleepy, but he didn't want to disturb his roommate.

At that, his attention turned to the freshman laying on the spare futon on the floor. It was Echizen's fourth night as his houseguest, and he still wasn't quite able to make heads or tails of the situation.

That wasn't entirely true, of course - he'd figured out the basics, but couldn't shake the feeling that there had to be more to the story. He was mostly troubled by the mystery of Echizen Ryoga - and not for the first time, either. To begin with, he had been incredibly suspicious when they'd met on that cruise, and Ryoma had claimed that he didn't know who the elder boy was. At the time, Tezuka had chalked it up to a case of the freshman being embarrassed of his family. As he watched, though, he saw none of the familiarity that one would expect from family; Ryoga seemed to halfway act the part, but his kouhai had been clearly bewildered and uncomfortable. Later, when Echizen announced that he had finally remembered where Ryoga was from, Tezuka had switched from being suspicious to thoroughly disturbed.

For a while, he'd wondered if perhaps they were brothers only in name. It wasn't uncommon for children to call an elder boy they were familiar with older brother, and the same was true for the reverse. The last name could have been a coincidence, or it could have been a fake picked out by Ryoga, or even just Ryoga teasing Echizen by pretending to be his older brother for real. It would have been easy to explain the odd situation then - that Ryoga was merely a neighbour of Ryoma's when they were younger, and the Echizen

family eventually moved house. Ryoga, being older, would no doubt have clear memories, but Ryoma, being significantly younger, would likely only remember snippets of that time. Indeed, that would have been a convenient conclusion to draw, but to do so would require ignoring the startling familial resemblance. Looking at the two standing across from each other, one couldn't imagine them to be anything *but* brothers - Ryoga essentially looked like an older, more laid back version of Ryoma.

Now the elder presented new mysteries. Tezuka wasn't certain of the boy's age, but judging from his appearance he was probably a good seven or eight years older than Ryoma, making him approximately twenty years in age. That was just a guess, of course, but he doubted he was off by more than two years at the most.

From Echizen's tale, it sounded as though Ryoga had been about thirteen or fourteen when the first fateful matches took place. Given the vast differences in reach, power and coordination between an early teen and a six-year old, there was no doubt that Ryoga had decided to throw the matches; either out of pity or protectiveness for his younger brother. That made sense, though in itself it was a sad story. What didn't make sense was Ryoga's return now, of all times. Was it really as Ryoma said - that his older brother had just been waiting until he was old enough to take care of himself? It did seem likely that the events on the cruise ship were a catalyst for the situation - Ryoga would have essentially lost an employer, and he would have been acutely reminded of a life he'd left behind. It was quite possible he'd grown bitter, and decided to inflict the same fate on his younger brother that he himself had suffered. Especially as they themselves were rather directly related to Ryoga's state of unemployment, even if the older Echizen had a healthy hand in it himself.

While that entire mystery was compelling, it didn't really help him figure out how they'd arrived at this situation. Tezuka hadn't even thought about it when offering his home to Echizen - he'd just known that one of his regulars was in trouble and needed help.

He was pulled from his musings suddenly by a small sound in the room. Frowning, he focused harder, trying to discern the source of the noise. It sounded like a sort of muffled chuckle, or maybe even muffled choking. Brow creasing, Tezuka listened a little more carefully, before the realisation finally dawned on him.

Echizen was crying.

He lay there for a good five minutes, listening to his roommate desperately trying to remain silent as he sobbed into his pillow. Again, Tezuka found himself wishing Oishi were present. His friend would know what to do in this sort of situation.

When the senior stopped and thought about it, it was the first time he'd seen the freshman actually show his emotional upset over the whole ordeal. For the first few weeks Echizen must have been too preoccupied with survival to think too deeply about his situation, and so only now would everything be beginning to sink in. The appearance of his cousin that afternoon probably had something to do with it, too.

Eventually, Tezuka couldn't put up with listening to Ryoma trying to stifle his sobs anymore. Sitting up, he reached over to his bedside table for his glasses, and then flicked on the lamp. "Echizen?"

He could hear Echizen's effort to steady his breathing, but the youth made no move to come out from under the covers. Eventually, the freshman replied in a somewhat strangled voice, "Buchou? You're awake?"

Sighing, he replied, "I haven't actually been to sleep yet." It was already past midnight, too.

In the silence that followed, he could hear the first-year still snuffling, though it was more irregular now - a sign that Ryoma was trying his hardest to stop. After a minute or so of that, Tezuka demanded, "Echizen, look at me."

There was a pause as his kouhai obviously considered disobeying, but he had to eventually realise that there was no escaping his captain at this point in time. Slowly, the strands of dark green hair poked out from under the covers, and a moment later, Echizen turned to face him. The freshman looked perfectly miserable - his eyes were rimmed red, and there were wet tear tracks on his face.

"Come over here," Tezuka ordered. Echizen hesitated, but a stern glance from the senior had him pushing back his covers and shuffling over to the bed.

The senior held his blankets open. Echizen stood there looking confused, so he sighed and ordered, "Well? Get in."

Cautiously, Echizen crawled into bed beside him, though Tezuka expected the only reason he'd done so was out of reflex for obeying the captain's orders in club. Once in, he started rubbing slow circles on the youth's back. "What's bothering you?"

Echizen just shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut tight. A couple of tears leaked out of the corners. "Shhh, just let it out."

The first-year barely stifled the next few sobs. Soon, he was crying openly, left fist clenching the senior's shirt. Tezuka just kept up his careful ministrations; occasionally muttering assurances that sounded awkward to his own ears every now and again.

Eventually, Echizen grew quiet, and became still. Tezuka carefully pulled the covers up over the youth who was still clutching at his pyjama shirt. His left hand reflexively settled on the younger boy's head, stroking the soft dark hair in a soothing, repetitive manner. It seemed like Echizen had eventually cried himself to sleep.

He hadn't really known what else to do, so had simply taken the course of action his own mother had whenever he'd been upset about something as a child. Admittedly, he hadn't really expected it to work on Echizen, but was relieved that it had.

It had been profoundly strange, though, witnessing the stoic freshman that normally presented such strength and lack of fear in a moment of emotional weakness. The poor youth must have been overwhelmed after holding everything in for so long. He seemed so frightfully delicate, so incredibly *young* right then. This small boy with tear tracks down his face didn't look anything like the middle schooler who could defeat adult pros on the tennis court.

Much like how many of his peers forgot that Tezuka was still the same age as them, just as many seemed to forget that Echizen wasn't.

Chapter 14

Author's Note: This was a bit of an awkward chapter - I even briefly considered scrapping it altogether, but it contained important legwork for the rest of the fic. So please bear with it. Also, cheese.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 14

Waking up that morning was extremely disorientating. Ryoma still regularly became confused, uncertain of whether he was at 'home', in the park, in the clubhouse or at Tezuka's house, but that morning was especially strange.

First of all, the bed was delightfully soft. As far as Ryoma was concerned, the spare futon was luxurious in itself, but this was on a whole other level - it had to be a dream still. He didn't want to shatter the illusion, but eventually, some distant part of his mind was telling him that there was something odd about the situation and to wake up already, so it was with great reluctance that he struggled to open his eyes.

It took a few moments to process where he was. He recognised the room fast enough by now, but it was clear he wasn't on the futon on the floor where he should be. The logical deduction, therefore, was that he was in Tezuka's bed. How-?

Ryoma's face started to burn crimson as the events of the previous night suddenly rushed back to him. He hadn't... oh god, Tezuka had seen him cry his eyes out like a five-year old. It had been past midnight, but he hadn't been able to sleep due to all the thoughts

whirling about chaotically in his head, still stirred up from the conversation with his cousin that afternoon. Suddenly he'd just been overwhelmed by everything. It had been a flood of loneliness and dejection and isolation that he'd been stubbornly ignoring, until the dam had burst and hit him all at once. Tears were leaking down his face before he even realised it, and soon he was practically sobbing, smothering his face in his pillow in hopes that he wouldn't wake the captain up. He hadn't been able to stop. It was like an involuntary action he couldn't control.

Tezuka *had* heard despite his best efforts, and forced him to face him. Ryoma hadn't wanted to, but he owed the senior a lot, and the habitual respect and obedience afforded to his senpai had already become an ingrained habit that was difficult to shake. The captain ordered him into the larger, softer bed, and somewhat robotically Ryoma had complied. He guessed he'd just been seeking the reassurance of another person's presence, and when Tezuka wrapped him in that loose embrace and started murmuring comforting words into his ears, he'd lost it and hadn't been able to suppress the tears anymore. Obviously he'd eventually fallen asleep, and the senior hadn't moved him.

Ryoma was mortified. It was probably the single most embarrassing thing he'd ever done in his life.

Rolling his head to the side, he could see the crumpled blankets partially thrown back. Curiously, he patted the bed next to him - it was still faintly warm. Tezuka had obviously awoken before him and left the bed a short while ago, for which Ryoma was incredibly grateful. That would have been an awkward moment otherwise, in more ways than one.

It still *could* be awkward, too. Ryoma sincerely hoped that this whole affair wouldn't prompt Tezuka to throw him out. He'd tried his hardest to be a good guest, but he was hardly going to blame the senior if he was made to pack his bags after that humiliating display of weakness.

There was little point in putting things off, so with some reluctance Ryoma left the soft, warm bed and padded to the bathroom with a change of clothes to prepare for the day. There was still his part-time junior coaching job that day, irritating though it was. The freshman stifled an annoyed sigh, reminding himself to be thankful that *anyone* had given him a paying job. Even if it meant correcting absolute beginners on their sloppy forms, having a small horde of kids asking stupid questions and dealing with the other junior coach - some high school kid that took the intermediate class on the other courts - getting snappy at him because he felt threatened. Fortunately, no one at the club had pegged him as a national junior high champion or a participant in the American Open yet, sparing him the horrors of miniature fans and endless attention. Obviously not many people at the club read Pro Tennis Monthly regularly. It was a small mercy. God only knew why Inoue put Seigaku in there at every available opportunity.

Shaking himself from those thoughts, Ryoma completed his morning routine and hesitantly made his way downstairs. Tezuka was in the kitchen, finishing cooking a Japanese-style breakfast. It had been a relief to discover that the senior possessed similar tastes to his own - bar the love of Ponta, unfortunately - especially as he was still finding himself having to force down the third meal of every day under Tezuka's imposing stare.

"Morning," he ventured tentatively, eyes following the various movements his senpai made about the kitchen. He'd been trying to learn a little bit more about cooking simply by observing the other boy, and was relieved to find that most of it *did* appear to merely be the appropriate application of heat to food. Some distant part of him noted that Tezuka probably wasn't the best role model when it came to cooking, but as far as Ryoma was concerned the meals were perfectly serviceable, even if nowhere near as delicious as Nanako's culinary delights. Survival came first after all; taste was a distant last place. The mere fact he once contemplated taking Inui up on his super-healthy juices from hell was proof of that.

"Morning," replied Tezuka as he served out some rice from the cooker. "Is there much you have to do today?"

"I have to leave to get to my part-time job in about half an hour." Could it even be called part-time if it was only one afternoon a week? Maybe he *should* draw attention to his American Open credentials and get a few more hours. "You?"

"I have a check-up with my doctor for my shoulder. After that I'll be stopping by the library to gather some references for an assignment."

"Is anything wrong?" Ryoma asked worriedly. Their captain seemed better than fine during the Nationals, but had he perhaps pushed his arm too far again?

"No, it's just a routine check-up. I have to go in once a month for the next six months, just in case."

"Hrm."

Tezuka placed a plateful of food in front of him, and took his own seat across from the youth. "It really is okay. We can even play a match tomorrow, if you would like."

That simultaneously brightened Ryoma up and allayed his concerns. "That would be good. Especially since there's no Sunday practice anymore."

"Indeed. It's fortunate in one regard that Winter allows more time for study, but the seasonal break means that a lot of club members neglect their training."

"Not you, though, right Buchou? Can't be getting careless." Ryoma commented with a slight smirk.

"Mada mada dane," Tezuka replied with a completely straight face.

They quickly lapsed into silence as they started eating. Fortunately, it seemed as though Tezuka wasn't going to comment on the night before, and Ryoma wasn't inclined to bring it up either. That was fine. Such a conversation couldn't be anything other than awkward, and if it wasn't going to change anything, pretending that he hadn't had a mental breakdown in the dead of the night suited the freshman just fine.

As soon as breakfast was finished, Echizen left for the courts, and Tezuka spent some time doing a few of the household chores he'd been neglecting before also leaving. The weather outside was brisk; not quite yet cold, but the breeze was cool enough that those sensitive to the weather would likely be pulling out long-sleeved shirts and jerseys. It seemed as though autumn was well underway now, and they could expect cool days as well as cold nights. It was lucky he'd found Echizen when he did.

Even as he headed to his doctor for his routine check-up, Tezuka found his thoughts occupied with Echizen. It was nothing new - for the past five days his thoughts had been occupied with little else. And after that whole affair the night before...

It was fortunate that Tezuka had been first to awake that morning - though no real surprise, as Echizen was still working through his no doubt massive sleep debt - and was able to leave the bed quietly enough to avoid any uncomfortable moments. There was no doubt in his mind that his kouhai would be embarrassed by his emotional breakdown, so he had decided the best course of action was to ignore it and act normal. This was probably a step in the right direction. Maybe now the first-year would be a little more willing to share some more details of his plight with him.

His doctor noticed that his mind wasn't really present during his check-up, so Tezuka used the opportunity to ask some questions about diets and nutrition, again for Echizen's benefit. His kouhai was still struggling to get through three square meals a day, and his servings remained no where near as large as the senior recalled them being in the past. The doctor had initially been confused by the

out-of-the-blue questions, but obliged him by answering as many as he could and directing him to some reading material - under the impression that an important science paper was troubling the senior. It felt like the hundredth lie Tezuka had spouted that week - a sensation he was not enjoying - but it was necessary if he was to keep Ryoma's confidence whilst still ensuring his wellbeing.

The library was the next stop after the doctor's office. It only took Tezuka a short time to complete the necessary research for his assignments - most papers requiring research having been completed well in advance of the due date already - so he spent some time leafing through some of the health and fitness texts his doctor had directed him to. A great deal of it parroted information spouted by Inui on a weekly basis, but the context changed everything. For one, he was wondering how on earth Echizen had been making it through morning practice without breakfast.

A lot of things were starting to make sense now that he was gathering the pieces of the puzzle. Echizen had already confessed - or rather, had it dragged out of him - that he'd only been able to buy breakfast for the first few days, and after that subsisted by mooching lunches and burgers from his friends. That revealed why the Ryuzaki girl had been so cheerful lately for one, in addition to adequately explaining why Echizen's stamina in morning practice had been noticeably poorer than afternoon practice. For most of the other regulars it was the exact opposite. They'd long attributed the disparity to Echizen's non-morning persona, but given his improvement over the past few mornings, Tezuka was forced to rethink that notion. The deep bags under his eyes and drop in class performance Inui had muttered about made sense too.

The breakdown the night before also prompted him to check out a few adolescent psychology textbooks, but they all seemed so melodramatic and impersonal that none of the information within their pages felt applicable at all. Growing frustrated, Tezuka abruptly closed the third such book he'd been leafing through. It was ridiculous to research this sort of thing - he was an adolescent

himself, he didn't need a book written by some sixty-year-old filled with abstract Freudian theories. What he really wanted was some of Oishi's and Fuji's talent for dealing with people. Though probably more Oishi's than Fuji's. Either way, it was clearly apparent that their skills were not something that could be learned by rote - in some areas it really did just come down to aptitude.

Several lights switching off in the east wing shook Tezuka from his introspection. A quick glance at the window revealed that it was already twilight, and that the library would be closing up soon. Cursing under his breath, the senior gathered his books, hurriedly shoved them in his bag and made his way to the exit while placing the references in the 'returns' pile instead of back on the shelves in their original locations as he normally did. Stupid, stupid, stupid! He was so used to not having to worry about anyone waiting for him at home that he'd completely forgotten to keep track of the time!

Pulling his mobile phone out of his bag as he left the building, he quickly dialled in Echizen's number - all of the team members had their numbers entered into his phone, likely at the hand of either Fuji or Inui. After a moment of trying to connect, a robotic voice on the other end informed him that the phone wasn't in service. Resisting the urge to slap a hand against his head, Tezuka just hurried his pace some more. Of course Echizen didn't have his phone on - it probably ran out of battery ages ago, and he hadn't seen the freshman recharge it at any point. Until recently, there simply wouldn't have *been* anywhere for him to recharge it.

It seemed like the bus would take forever to get home. It was already dark by the time he disembarked. When he arrived at the house, Echizen was sitting quietly next to the front door, knees tucked against his chest and cap pulled down low over his eyes. How long had he been waiting for him? It was starting to get chilly out, and Echizen didn't have a jacket.

"Echizen," he called, alerting the other of his presence. The head snapped up and he was confronted with a pair of curiously blank

golden-brown eyes before the freshman inclined his head marginally in greeting.

"I apologise for being back so late," he said, fishing for his key in his pockets and unlocking the door. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Don't worry about it," Echizen murmured. They shuffled into the house and removed their shoes in an uncomfortable silence - Tezuka felt too guilty to say anything else. In retrospect, this was probably why Echizen kept waiting for him after practice. There was a spare key that he should have lent the young Regular for the duration of his stay - it was high time he tracked it down and gave it to his kouhai.

"I'll get started on dinner. You go have a bath and warm up."

Echizen's voice was soft when he replied. "Thanks Buchou. You really don't have to go to so much trouble."

It seemed an odd thing to say when he'd just left him waiting out in the cold for who knew how long. Was Echizen being sarcastic? "Don't mention it."

Tezuka hardened his resolve. At the moment, the freshman didn't have anyone else to rely on but him. And until Echizen was willing to accept assistance from others, he was responsible. It wasn't enough to just be a senpai, or a rival, or a captain. He was the older brother, now. No, not even that. Ryoga had failed Ryoma as an elder brother as well. Tezuka would be something else. And he would do right by him.

Echizen was the one person he could not allow himself to fail. He would not allow the young tennis player's senpai to fail him, the way his own had when he'd been a freshman.

On Sunday, they played tennis. Tezuka won, but only barely. During one long rally, Ryoma smiled properly for the first time in weeks.

Chapter 15

Author's Note: The second half of this chapter is a bit exposition heavy. But the first half has Seigaku Regulars! Yay!

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 15

Tuesday afternoon practice had some of the more promising juniors pitted against each other in matches, leaving the regulars and freshmen to watch. Most of the non-regular seniors were exempt from afternoon practices now, giving a choice to those who valued their studies more than tennis, even though most people still attended. Coach Ryuuzaki was present and in good spirits, wandering the courts shouting corrections to forms and spouting criticisms left, right and centre. She'd obviously missed it after having a team of regulars that managed and coached themselves so well.

"So, Inui, what's the latest word?" Fuji asked, sidling over to the data-gatherer.

"Fuji. There seems to have been some improvement, though I have not come any closer to determining the cause. A confrontation might be necessary after all."

"What are you guys talking about?" Momoshiro asked, barrelling into the conversation. The commotion drew Kikumaru's attention, who dragged his doubles partner over with him. Naturally, wherever the majority of their senpai gathered, the freshmen trio followed. Only Kaidoh, Tezuka and Echizen remained in place on the other side of

the courts safely out of earshot, though the Viper kept glaring in their direction. Probably because his rival was present.

"Echizen," Fuji replied with a smile.

"Eh, Ochibi? What's he done now?"

"We're not exactly certain. That's why we're talking about it," Fuji responded easily.

"He has been acting peculiar for some time now," Inui reported. "Most strange of late is how he's been shadowing Tezuka. He's even been eating lunch with the seniors."

"Nothing so strange about that, Inui," Oishi remarked with a light smile. "Didn't you stalk Tezuka for several months at some point?"

"I concede your point. However, the situation is entirely different."

"What are you talking about, Inui-senpai?" Katsuo asked earnestly, appearing to sport genuine worry for his classmate.

"Something fairly severe was bothering him a few weeks ago," Inui noted, flipping through his notebook. "Based on the data at the time, I concluded that he had fallen ill. Based on more recent data, I believe that conclusion was incorrect."

"Oh, I remember!" Kikumarū recalled suddenly. "You're talking about when Ochibi drank your juice and didn't react *at all*, right? Hey, has it happened again?"

The data-expert just shook his head. "Negative. Echizen's performance in practice since has been exemplary, so no further opportunities have arisen. It is obvious that he has been doing quite a lot of additional practice outside of club hours."

"So why is that a bad thing?" Momoshiro asked. "The Viper still keeps up his insane routine every day."

"But not at the expense of his health. Echizen has not been looking well lately, wouldn't you agree?"

"He has been looking tired, even though he's been getting to practice early," Oishi commented, starting to look worried.

"Saa, he's been losing weight, too, hasn't he, Inui?"

"It is a difficult thing to measure, but I believe so, yes. Something is definitely amiss," Inui concluded.

"I agree," Fuji said with a smile on his face.

"It's been bugging me," Momoshiro piped up suddenly, "But Echizen used to hitch a ride on the back of my bike to and from school pretty regularly. He hasn't done it in ages, though. I don't even pass him on the way or anything."

"His homework's been really messy, too," Horio commented. When everyone looked at him he defended, "What? You wouldn't try to copy from one of the top kids in the class? I mean... that is..."

"He seems to have picked up a little over the past week, though," Fuji mused, slanting a glance towards where their two strongest players were silently watching the matches.

Across the court, Tezuka kept a wary eye on his team who seemed to be congregating in a circle - usually that meant either gossip or trouble. He hoped it was the former, and hoped it wasn't about him. Regardless, he could hardly assign them laps for not practicing, as with all of the courts currently occupied, there was nowhere for them to practice. Ever since their win at the Nationals, the ranks of their tennis club had swelled somewhat, and it was putting a slight strain on their facilities. Seigaku's tennis club was probably one of the better-equipped clubs in the school - especially after winning the Nationals - but it still didn't have the sort of facilities a private school like Hyotei boasted.

Turning his attention away from the group on the other side of the courts, Tezuka cast a critical eye over his companion instead. The past few days had certainly been kinder to his guest; in fact, the difference was so startling that the senior found it hard to believe that none of them had staged some sort of intervention sooner. Echizen still had that lost and troubled look about him a lot of the time and continued to struggle with maintaining eye contact, but his spirit had picked up some. During tennis practice at the very least he seemed almost cheerful. That is, cheerful for Echizen. The dark bags under his eyes had diminished to faint shadows, and he was much better kempt and healthier looking than what he had been when Tezuka had first taken him in. He would still need to gain some weight back, but the senior was no longer concerned for his physical health. Practically force-feeding the youth breakfast, lunch, and dinner in addition to making sure that his guest made it to bed at a reasonable time each night had helped there.

Now there was the much more delicate matter of his protégé's mental health to consider.

Admittedly, Tezuka was not an expert in deeply emotional matters. He normally left the emotional wellbeing of the team members to Oishi or one of the other seniors, all of whom were better equipped for understanding and handling matters when someone had some sort of personal crisis. Of course, none of the other regulars even knew about Ryoma's situation, so the duty of making certain the freshman wasn't going to fall apart lay with him.

He was really rather impressed with how well Echizen had held it together so far, but now that he was aware of the situation he'd have to be blind not to see how the freshman's nerves were fraying under the stress and emotional turmoil. The breakdown he had in the middle of the night a few days ago was proof of that. Tezuka originally hoped that after that Echizen would open up to him some more, but frustratingly it seemed that the opposite had occurred. The already introverted first-year had largely withdrawn into himself, almost to the point where it felt somewhat like when he'd first arrived

at Seigaku. All of the team had grown rather used to Echizen's personality by now, so most of them were unlikely to notice the increased reticence unless actively looking for it.

The only solution Tezuka could really come up with was to keep an eye on the other boy as much as possible. So far, it was turning out to be easier than what he'd thought. After the first few days of quite literally dragging Echizen to lunch to make certain he ate, the freshman started coming of his volition. Ryoma also waited for him after practice these days, rather than running off for burgers with Momoshiro as he used to. Classes were now the only times he wasn't being shadowed by the first-year, and while in some ways he was relieved - it made it much easier for him to keep a vigilant eye on the youth - he was concerned by how distant the freshman regular seemed from his peers. Had Ryoma always been like that and they'd just never noticed? He wondered if the easy-going friendship with Momoshiro had simply blinded them to how disconnected Echizen was from his surroundings.

It was hardly a problem now, of course. Echizen got along quite well with the rest of the regulars, remarkably so when you took into account his outwardly unsociable nature, but Tezuka was concerned about what might happen to him when the seniors graduated, and then the current juniors the year after that.

Several of the matches dragged on into tiebreak, which Coach Ryuuzaki eventually called to a halt, finally allowing practice to end. Echizen rebuffed Momoshiro's offers to go out for burgers again, which only caused Tezuka more worry. As much as he liked being able to keep a close eye on his charge, it was troubling to watch Echizen actively try and estrange himself.

Regardless, it was one of those things that he probably should not comment on, as Echizen had always been very courteous in not editorialising on his own social life; and there were plenty of editorials to be had there, too. So they walked home in companionable silence once again, did their homework - with Echizen occasionally looking over his shoulder to correct his English,

himself returning the favour for Maths - and then headed downstairs to organise dinner.

Tezuka finished up with the food while Echizen set the table in what was quickly becoming an oddly comfortable domestic routine. He'd originally expected that the burden of a houseguest would mean extra work for him, but contrary to what he expected from the often-lazy freshman, Ryoma wordlessly pitched in with chores whenever he could, even without being asked. He had taken over dishwashing, was vigilant about picking up after himself, and was always sorting and taking out the trash. He even took care of his own laundry. It was actually a little unnerving. Then again, perhaps it wasn't that surprising. Echizen had clearly developed a fierce independence streak.

There was one comment he couldn't withhold as they sat down to eat, though. Dinner was the safest time to try and get Echizen talking as the food provided a good distraction when the subject matter got too awkward. There was the added bonus that when asked a difficult question Echizen couldn't just escape. The one thing he had brought away from those books at the library had been that talking was apparently important, so Tezuka was quite intent on it.

"What I don't understand is why you don't go defeat Ryoga now," Tezuka stated without preamble. "In a match where you are in optimum condition and aware of the consequences, there's no way you could lose to him. And certainly not with all that extra training you've been doing lately."

Echizen mulled over that for a moment, before reluctantly replying, "It's a little more complicated than that. For one, he's been training with the old man for over a month. He was a tough opponent before - now I can't be sure I *could* win a fair match. Besides, Ryoga isn't the one I want to beat."

"Even so..."

Echizen shook his head, cutting him off. "Buchou... what difference does it really make if it's Ryoga or me that gets thrown out?"

"He's certainly old enough not to be relying on your parents, for one. Whereas you are still expected to attend school."

"Che. I'm managing fine."

It was a lie and they both knew it. Echizen couldn't have lasted forever in his previous situation. As it was, Tezuka wasn't sure how long-term the current situation could hold for. The freshman was good at keeping his own secrets, but the other regulars were going to find out about his situation eventually, and they were not quite so clandestine.

Still, Tezuka understood one thing: Echizen was not cold-hearted enough to knowingly inflict that fate upon another person, especially after living through it himself. He expected that Ryoma perhaps even felt it fair, given that in his mind his brother had given up quite a lot for him so many years ago, and that it was simply time to return the favour. Of course, admitting that he would rather suffer the discomfort instead of somebody else was not Echizen's style, so Tezuka didn't press the issue any further.

"I'm still rather surprised that you haven't put up more of a fight," the senior admitted. "From what little I've heard from Ryuuzaki-sensei, and my impression of your personality, you seem more like the kind of person who'd cross his arms and stay put rather than leave simply because your father told you to."

Echizen hunched his shoulders. "I did sort of try. But he just picked me up and threw me out of the house. I'm still not strong enough to beat him."

Tezuka visibly started. "He physically threw you?"

Ryoma scowled. "No cracks about my height, please."

"Since when I have I ever made fun at your expense? It was a serious question."

Seeming puzzled, Echizen replied, "Well, yeah. I did say I was thrown out, Buchou. I didn't leave willingly."

Every time Tezuka started to develop some optimism about the situation, it seemed to become more hopeless. He'd been wondering why Echizen apparently hadn't even tried to return to his house, especially when things became as difficult as they had. Since it was Echizen, there was obviously some pride at work, but if it had been such a forceful expulsion... of course the youth hadn't considered trying to return.

It was still difficult to reconcile this with his image of one of his old tennis heroes, though.

Ryoma, for his part, watched silently as Tezuka seemed to turn over the latest piece of information in his head. He was getting a little better at reading the enigmatic captain, probably from the sheer amount of time they'd spent together over the past week if nothing else. It still struck him as a little odd that their normally reticent leader had effectively been playing the part of his counsellor - it seemed like more Oishi's sort of thing - but at least the senior didn't ask him to repeat himself, and avoided the topics that made him the most uncomfortable. As mortified beyond belief as he was, Ryoma had to admit that Tezuka had already helped him a lot. It was such a weight off his shoulders that someone knew; that someone understood what was going on when he was a little off-colour. He didn't exactly appreciate the mothering, but then, Tezuka's form of mothering wasn't so bad. As embarrassing as it was to even remember it, when he'd broken down in the middle of the night the senior's presence had been soothing.

When he thought about it, Ryoma supposed that was part of the reason why he'd started hanging around Tezuka so much; he didn't have to be on edge all the time, so conscious of his behaviour. With the others, he was constantly worried about them finding out about

his situation, but since the senior already knew he didn't have to explain himself if he did something that might have been considered out of the ordinary.

In addition to the emotional support, his senpai had been so generous... he'd cooked meals, given him shelter - he had even lent him a warmer pair of pyjamas as the nights became cooler. Ryoma was acutely aware of how very much he owed the senior; the extra food alone had to cost a fair bit of money. Tezuka had rebuked his offers to contribute to the food budget, insisting that his parents had left behind more than enough funds when they went away and that he should save his money for things like clothes and tennis gear. He'd tried to make up for the burden in other ways, like taking over garbage duty and cleaning the dishes, but it didn't feel like nearly enough in the wake of the inconvenience he had to be causing his senpai.

On the weekend, he'd watched Tezuka do the cleaning, making mental notes of everything involved. The only thing he could really think of was perhaps taking over the rest of the housework. As much as he detested housework, it was apparently - like laundry - something he ought to know how to do, and it was one of the few things he could potentially do to at least minimize the impact of his presence in the senior's household. He'd try to take over that next weekend. It seemed simple enough - no more complicated than cleaning duty at school - and it wasn't like the house was that messy so it shouldn't be too hard.

He'd still feel better if the captain accepted some money, though. Not that he really had the money to spare - he had already had to spend a good chunk of the money Nanako had given him on some winter clothes, and his weekly earnings at the tennis club were half eaten up just on transport costs alone through the week. He needed to get toiletries, too. Doing the math, after those expenses he wouldn't be able to contribute enough money to cover all that he ate - or rather, what Tezuka made him eat - but even a small amount would make him feel a little better.

Some sort of present to convey his thanks instead, maybe? Again, that presented the money problem, but he was sure that he could budget for something. Though Tezuka might not accept that, either. What could he get the senior that would be appropriate, anyway? Ryoma turned the thought over in his head as they finished eating dinner, but continued to come up blank. It was frustrating. He really had nothing to his name. What on earth could he do to repay the senior he owed so much?

It was the same as finding a job, he reasoned. In what ways could he be useful? Unfortunately, with someone of Tezuka's skill, tennis wasn't really an option - if anything, tennis was one of the things Ryoma was indebted to the senior for. His only other marketable skill was his fluency in English. Would the captain accept tutoring? Probably not. Tezuka seemed to have a bit of a gift for languages - he was practically fluent in German after his stint in Germany, and was probably the top of his class in English as well, though Ryoma could still pick on his grammar and vocabulary.

Ryoma sighed without meaning to, drawing a curious glance from his host. He just shook his head slightly, dismissing the matter. It was a lot better staying here than in the clubhouse, certainly, but the idea of being a burden to the person he respected the most continued to bother him.

There was one thing he could try, he realised, the seeds of an idea forming in his mind. It was a bit of a long shot... but it was something he could do, probably. He owed the senior enough. If it were for Tezuka, Ryoma would now even lose a tennis match on command.

Chapter 16

Author's Note: I'm quite sure all of those reading saw this one coming. ;)

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 16

The rest of the week passed largely without incident. Ryoma had already decided that he had to repay his captain somehow for his generosity, but it was difficult to work up the courage to broach the subject. Thus once again he was barely paying any attention in classes - by now that wasn't anything new. So long as he did his homework he'd be fine. Tezuka had started checking it for him, and the senior pointed out any mistakes he made. It was just one more thing he had to thank his senpai for.

Tennis at least was still enjoyable, but Ryoma couldn't quite shake the feeling that the other regulars were paying a bit too much attention to him lately. Inui in particular seemed to be following him around. Though Inui and stalking were practically synonymous anyway.

All of those concerns were immediately pushed aside when Nanako arrived towards the end of practice again. She'd started dropping by the tennis courts every couple of days; asking how he was, bringing him a bento with his favourite foods, and transporting occasional odds and ends she thought he might need from his room. The previous time she'd even smuggled Karupin with her, and Ryoma had spent a good ten minutes hugging his cat and trying not to cry. It had been even harder to send Karupin back with her, but he knew

that he couldn't care for his pet properly in his current situation. Sometimes he wasn't sure if his cousin's visits were breaking his resolve or keeping him sane, but he never left her waiting when she turned up towards the end of his tennis practices. He knew that by now some of the tennis club members had noticed his regular visitor, but Tezuka stopped them from interfering. Ryoma was once again incredibly grateful to his captain. If it hadn't been for Tezuka, he really didn't know how he would have lasted.

Due to the visits, he'd come to know Nanako a lot better. By his nature, he wasn't a terribly chatty person, but he usually made an effort to give courteous answers to her questions when she pressed him for the first five minutes of every meeting. After that she'd happily fill the silence talking about this and that and usually having a good rant about his father. There were times when he was convinced that his cousin had to be a saint, going to so much trouble for him, but when he heard her talk about his father he quickly changed his mind.

She usually left after ten or twenty minutes, when it looked like practice was about to wrap up. It was odd that no one grumbled about him missing drills, or even at Tezuka's laxness on the matter - usually people had to run laps for interrupting practice - but Ryoma was grateful for it. It was probably the knowledge that out of all those who'd be in the club the next year, he was probably the one that needed to practice the least.

He went and hit a tennis ball against a wall while Tezuka locked up the clubhouse; mind half on his cousin's visit and half on the conversation he was planning to have with the captain later. Tezuka, for his part, did nothing more than slant a curious glance at the freshman, who had been sneaking quick looks at him all day. He hoped nothing serious had happened - Echizen's edginess had rubbed off on him during practice, and he'd assigned more laps to the others than usual. It had the benefit of distracting them from asking about Echizen's cousin, at least.

The walk and bus ride home that day was quiet - not that he and Echizen usually spoke much, but Tezuka usually made a point of asking a few cursory questions about the freshman's day, given that there wasn't anyone else to do so. The mood was somehow unusually tense, and the senior didn't dare break the first-year's reverie, since he seemed to be concentrating particularly hard on something. If he had to guess, Tezuka would have likened it to the way Echizen acted whenever he was psyching himself up for a match with a difficult opponent. But who was the opponent this time?

The odd vibe lingered while they did their homework that afternoon, and persisted through a silent dinner. Tezuka made a mental note to go food shopping again soon. Echizen still wasn't matching the sort of appetite he recalled Momoshiro complaining about, but was managing a more normal diet now, even if he still had rather small servings.

It wasn't until they were back upstairs in his room, reading before bed, that Tezuka finally got to discover what had been eating at the freshman.

He'd returned from his bath to find the first-year sitting in his chair, book in hand, staring into space. Echizen had jumped upon his return, but Tezuka said nothing of it, merely retrieving a book of his own and settling on his bed to read. Or rather, trying to. It was rather hard to concentrate when the other person in the room kept alternating between pretending to read a book and staring at you.

"Echizen, is something bothering you?" he asked finally.

There was a long pause, to the point where the senior had just about resigned himself to not getting an answer. Then...

"Buchou... I really am grateful, you know?"

Tezuka paused at the unnatural *smallness* of Echizen's voice. It had been a hopeful sort of whisper with a slight waver to it. What had brought that on? "For what?"

"You know... all this. Everything."

"You don't need to thank me, Echizen. Anyone would have done the same."

"No, I have to thank you," came the stubborn reply. Tezuka sighed, setting aside his book as Echizen moved to sit on the bed next to him.

"Really, thanks aren't necessary. I'm sure you would do the same for me if I were in your position."

There was an odd light in the freshman's eyes. He watched curiously as the other boy seemed to have an internal struggle.

"Buchou...?"

"Yes, Echizen?" he replied patiently.

The response he received was not one he had been expecting. Echizen suddenly divested himself of his shirt, hesitated, then pulled him forward and pressed their lips together.

The kiss was awkward, and even though he'd instigated it, Echizen didn't seem to know what exactly to do next. Tezuka carefully placed his hands on the youth's shoulders and gently pushed away, trying to ignore the enticing warmth of the pale skin beneath his fingers. He was a teenager after all, and while he was not quite as ruled by his hormones as some of his peers, he was just as responsive to stimuli as all the others.

"Echizen, what is this about?" Tezuka was relatively certain - having come to know his protégé a little better recently - that Ryoma wasn't acting on some newly developed crush. There had to be another reason behind the unexpected action.

Echizen's voice was small when he replied. "You keep doing so much for me. I don't have anything - this is all that I can pay you

back with."

"You really think that I am the sort of person who would demand payment?"

"I don't like being in anyone's debt," came the muttered reply.

Once again, it seemed like Echizen's pride was his biggest downfall. Still, the fact that he went that far was troubling.

"Echizen..."

"I couldn't do it before, but if it's you..." Echizen blurted, stumbling over his words. "I can do it if it's you."

"You don't really understand what it is you are offering, do you?" Tezuka asked softly.

"I understand!"

"No, you don't. Not properly," the senior observed, pulling the boy into a gentle hug. As he expected, Echizen was trembling. He'd been nervous. How long had it taken the first-year to work up the courage to do that? And where on earth had he acquired the idea?

Tezuka suddenly recalled that chance encounter with Echizen in the business district. It had troubled him at that time, but now that he thought back with the new context, it made a lot more sense.

Echizen hadn't actually been trying to sell himself, had he? The freshman was rather reluctant to talk about a lot of what had transpired in the past month, but Tezuka already knew that the rookie had taken up that junior coaching position at the nearby tennis club to earn some money. From what the senior could gather, prior to that he'd been desperate. Desperate enough to do *that* ?

He shook his head to himself. No, while it was likely that man offered to pay for Ryoma, he had obviously resisted the notion, which explained a lot about their position when Tezuka came across them.

Besides, he could still remember how Echizen had quivered for nearly an hour afterwards - he'd obviously been badly spooked. Knowing the full situation as it stood now, Tezuka was glad he'd insisted on the freshman staying the night - he didn't want to try and imagine what sort of state Echizen might have been in the next morning if he'd spent the night alone in the clubhouse after a harrowing experience such as that.

"Why not?" came the whisper next to him. "Am I not good enough? Is it-"

"It's nothing to do with you," Tezuka interrupted before that destructive train of thought could continue. Honestly, he was having difficulty reconciling the fact that this painfully unsure of himself Echizen was the same boy who was so cocky and arrogant on the tennis court. "I just don't believe you have any need to do such a thing. And I refuse to take advantage of it." He made a mental note to keep an even closer eye on the youth to make sure he didn't try it with anyone else, and then winced at the thought that things had even come to that point. "Besides, it would be illegal. You're underage."

"I'm almost thirteen," Echizen grumbled under his breath.

"Almost. And that wouldn't change a thing anyway." There could be no room for argument. "Put your shirt back on. Besides, do your preferences even lie in that direction?"

Slowly dragging the shirt back over his head, Echizen asked, "Does that even matter?" Then paused. "Oh, sorry Buchou. I guess you might have taken offence-"

"Don't apologise," he interrupted again, wondering if the situation could possibly get any more awkward than it already was.

"Then you're-"

Pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers, Tezuka admitted, "I honestly haven't even thought about it before. But as I said, it wouldn't change anything anyway. You shall not turn into a prostitute."

Echizen scowled - whether he was offended by the term, or embarrassed at being rebuked was anyone's guess. "Then what else can I do?"

"You don't have to do anything."

"But-"

"Echizen. This matter is not open for discussion. The only things I expect from you are that you take care of yourself, keep up in your studies, and play tennis. I am not going to ask for anything more."

"I don't want to be a charity case!" Echizen lashed out.

"You aren't. You're scarcely a hassle at all. If anything, your presence has made the house less empty in my parent's absence. Enough of this nonsense. It's time to go to sleep."

Somewhat sulkily, Echizen retired to his own futon. Tezuka hopped under the covers of his own bed and flicked off the lamp, hopefully killing any further attempts at discussion. That certainly was an awkward affair. It was fortunate that his concern over the fact that the first-year had tried something so outrageous outweighed his own embarrassment. It would take a while to erase the mental image of a shirtless Echizen Ryoma offering himself to him.

Needless to say, Tezuka didn't sleep well that night. He had the feeling that Echizen didn't sleep very well either.

Chapter 17

Author's Note: This was a hard chapter to write. But oh so fun.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 17

It had been awkward for several days after the 'incident', but by about the middle of week Tezuka had stopped blushing every time he so much as glanced in the freshmen's direction, and Echizen was at last somewhat able to talk with him normally once more, though they didn't even wander near the subject again. Tezuka admitted that his curiosity in regards to the altercation he'd obviously witnessed the tail-end of in the business district was not quite up to the mammoth task of overcoming his embarrassment and horror at being propositioned.

Of course, in the new social drama that was his life, things never stayed calm for a long. As far as the senior was concerned, having the sole responsibility for a person's wellbeing was a rather consuming affair. It wasn't stealing his attention during class anymore, but a good portion of his time outside of it was spent monitoring the freshman and speculating on any number of physical or emotional problems that the youth might be hiding from him. Having just discovered how close his charge had come to turning himself into a prostitute, Tezuka thought this concern justified.

It was with this thought in mind that he watched in mild consternation as Echizen turned down another offer for burgers from Momoshiro, then similarly dismissed the freshmen trio. As he approached, the

youth put his racket away and shouldered his bag. "Oh, you're ready to go already?"

"You don't have to wait for me," Tezuka pointed out.

Echizen just shrugged. "Don't mind."

"You should hang out with the other freshmen more," the senior suggested.

Echizen stiffened, before gruffly replying, "Doesn't matter."

"... It doesn't?"

He watched as the first-year fiddled with a piece of grass between his fingers, and concluded that he wasn't going to get an answer to that question.

The social situation with Echizen was an odd one. The freshmen practically hung off him, but they didn't seem to really qualify as the boy's friends - indeed, Echizen rarely fraternised outside of school with them, instead seeming to prefer the company of the other regulars. While Tezuka certainly encouraged team bonding, he'd quietly started inviting the freshmen along to regular-only club activities under various pretences, in hopes that their rookie would have people his own age to socialise with. He'd been doing this even before the current crisis, but now these efforts seemed phenomenally more important. After all, if one didn't have family, they next had to rely on friends.

Unfortunately, it seemed that plan hadn't worked. It didn't take a genius to deduce that Horio's rather loud personality clashed horribly with Echizen's natural introversion, and Kachirou and Katsuo had wound up befriending Horio first, leaving the other first year to fend mostly for himself amongst the juniors and seniors. In retrospect, had he not given Echizen the opportunity to play in the intra-school ranking matches, he imagined that the first-year would have been

suffering an even more tortured existence than his own freshman year. Still, thinking about it like that didn't solve the current problem.

"Don't you ever get lonely?" Tezuka asked eventually. It wasn't the sort of personal question he liked asking, but given the circumstances...

Echizen shuffled his feet a little at that, before sourly admitting, "Maybe a little. I don't... well, that is until... you know... After I got kicked out, I guess it's been a bit different." His voice became so soft that Tezuka had to strain his ears to hear it. "That first night when I was sleeping in the park... it was like being the only person in the world. I hated leaving school after practice... I'd even listen to Inui-senpai prattle on about his data sooner than leave."

It made more sense now why Echizen scarcely left his side these days, even right after that embarrassing affair. He hadn't particularly minded, as the freshman was never an intrusive presence that demanded attention, but he'd thought it odd for a person who'd always been so standoffish and independent to suddenly follow him like a shadow. But with independence suddenly thrust upon him... that month spent living in the park and clubhouse had left a deeper mark than what he'd originally supposed. That was too much time spent alone with depressing thoughts. Ryoma was still a kid, after all.

However... "Isn't that all the more reason to get to know the other freshmen?" After all, Horio, Kachirou and Katsuo were no longer the only other first-years in the club. Their numbers usually picked up throughout the year as people decided what clubs to join, and their ranks had swelled both after their success in the Regionals and then phenomenally more so after the Nationals.

Echizen just stuck his hands in his pockets and didn't comment. Clearly the matter was not up for discussion.

It had been a long shot, anyway. Still, it might be worth organising another team event of sorts.

Ryoma, for his part, turned the latest conversation over in his head several times, before forcefully pushing it to the back of his brain to think about later. He supposed he couldn't blame the captain - he'd obviously horribly embarrassed the senior with his attempts at compensation a few days prior; he'd be doing his best to offload him on to someone else too. Ryoma grimaced at the memory. He *knew* that he'd mess it up somehow. Though a part of him was a tiny bit relieved. He hadn't lied - he found the thought bearable so long as it was Tezuka, but honestly, it had been uncharted territory. The school library had not been at all useful in researching something like *that* .

Hunching his shoulders, he didn't speak to the senior for the journey 'home' - he'd started to think of Tezuka's house like that, but mentally chastised himself for the slip every time. Homework was similarly done in silence, and they started preparing dinner in the same manner.

Then the quiet routine was shattered by the ringing phone.

Ryoma hadn't paid it any mind, instead taking over serving out the rice as Tezuka left the kitchen and hurried to answer. He figured that it was probably either Inui, or a telemarketer, or the senior's parents checking up on him. After all, it wasn't like the phone hadn't rung before. When his captain returned to the room looking slightly disturbed, though, he paused and turned his full attention to his senpai. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just... my parents are coming home."

A spoon clattered noisily to the floor. Embarrassed, Ryoma picked it back up, repeating lamely, "Your parents are coming home."

"Yes."

"Your grandfather too?"

Tezuka visibly hesitated. "... No, they said he's going to stay a little longer."

Ryoma paused, digesting that information. Hesitantly, he started to ask, "Should I-"

"Don't worry about it," Tezuka interrupted, quietly resuming preparing dinner. "I already spoke with them about your situation, and they didn't mind."

"You told?"

"Of course not. I was vague. They understand your need for privacy."

"But even so, maybe they-"

"They really are okay with your presence here. And even if they weren't, what would you do? As I understand it, you have nowhere else to go."

It had been said matter-of-factly, but to Ryoma it felt like a punch to the stomach.

"Right," he murmured. "... When will they be arriving?"

"They should be here when we get home tomorrow afternoon." Ryoma nodded mutely to show he understood, and turned his attention to his food.

He barely made it through even half of dinner that night, and only that much due to the captain's stern glare. It was impossible to eat with the butterflies dancing in his stomach.

Tezuka's parents. It had always been a thought lingering uncomfortably at the back of his mind as one of the many factors capable of upsetting his current safety net. A mere hour earlier he'd been worried that the whole awkward affair with his senpai a few days ago would eventually wind up in his expulsion back on to the streets, but that was completely overshadowed by this new development. What were the senior's parents like? He vaguely recalled meeting Tezuka's mother at the door that one time he'd

come to visit, but couldn't remember anything about her. They were probably extremely strict and proper, if their son was anything to go by.

There wasn't much sleep to be had that night. Ryoma spent most of it fretting about what might happen, and quietly turning over contingency plans in his head.

The next day wasn't much better. He nearly messed up drills in the morning, and one of the juniors almost managed to get a point against him in the afternoon. The stares of the other regulars prickled at the back of his neck, but he brushed it off as best he could. Ironically, the only person not to notice for once was the ever-vigilant captain. For all his nonchalance over the issue, apparently the news had rattled him some too.

Ryoma found his feet dragging when they left club that afternoon to head back to the captain's house. Not knowing what to expect bothered him immensely. He was sure he was going to make a bad impression and make life difficult for Tezuka. His parents might have said that they didn't mind over the phone, but after they met him...

He was mildly shocked when he realised that they had arrived back at the house. Tezuka opened the door cautiously, calling out a tentative and formal, "I'm home."

"Kunimitsu!" A voice exclaimed. A woman, looking to be somewhere in her mid-forties and wearing an apron appeared in the hallway looking slightly harried, but immediately broke into a wide smile. "How have you been? Oh, you must be Echizen Ryoma. Tezuka Ayana. My husband Kuniharu is upstairs - honey, come down and say hello!" she called out.

"Um, pleased to meet you," Ryoma muttered, managing a quick, stiff bow. Tezuka's mother was a lot more outgoing than he'd imagined. She had a sweet voice and rather... warm demeanour. There was something homey about her. Privately, given the captain's formal speech patterns and impeccable manners, he'd been expecting

some quiet, stern, old-fashioned matron dressed in an elaborate kimono instead.

A man who had to have been Tezuka's father descended the stairs, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Ryoma couldn't help but stare. He looked like a much older, more weathered version of Tezuka, but the freshman couldn't ever imagine their rigid tennis captain wearing such casual clothes. The slump of his shoulders made him look tired, but he managed a tense smile at the sight of the two students.

"Welcome home, father," the senior stated formally. "How was your trip?"

"We can talk about that later," he dismissed, turning soft brown eyes on the shorter boy. "Echizen Ryoma, is it? Tezuka Kuniharu." He wavered for a minute, then at his wife's sharp elbow in his side sheepishly proffered his hand. A little bewildered, Ryoma took it and shook it, ducking his head as he did so.

"We heard you grew up in America," Ayana explained. "We thought a western introduction might be more appropriate."

"That's very thoughtful of you," Ryoma managed, though he couldn't really bring himself to raise his voice much above a whisper.

"Listen to you, I haven't heard such manners from anyone other than my own son. Have you been rubbing off on him?" she tutted at the senior, though was wearing a pleased smile.

"Kunimitsu takes more after my father, always being so formal and polite," Kuniharu commented idly. Privately, Ryoma was too busy reeling from hearing people call the captain by his first name to really register that information.

"How is grandfather?" Tezuka asked.

There was an awkward silence, and Ryoma could practically feel two pairs of eyes dart over him. He'd known it wouldn't be long before he'd find himself intruding on a family moment, and tried to think of

some way to politely excuse himself. "He sends his regards, and his congratulations on your latest test results."

"But how did-"

"Let's not stand here discussing things in the foyer," Ayana announced firmly, almost visibly taking command of her household. "I've prepared some afternoon tea in the living room, we can talk in there. You too, Echizen. It'll be lovely."

With an efficient hand, the woman somehow had all three males seated around a coffee table holding cups of tea in a matter of moments. Ryoma found himself sitting back ramrod straight, regularly checking his senpai for cues on how to act in this odd situation. Tezuka Ayana was already efficiently grilling her son on a number of mundane matters - what shopping needed to be done, how he'd been eating, school, tennis, student council... all the standard things one would expect a parent to ask. Ryoma found himself practically chugging his tea, simply so he'd have something to look busy with to avoid getting dragged into the interrogation.

Tezuka apparently had other plans.

"You took such wonderful care of the house," the woman all but bubbled, glancing about appreciatively. "I think it might even be cleaner than when we left."

"Of course it is; did you really think that Kunimitsu would be throwing wild parties?" her husband remarked dryly. Ryoma briefly broke into a smirk before he managed to school his features back into a carefully neutral expression. He'd been seen, however; the man sent him a sly wink.

"Echizen helped also. He cleaned the bathroom and did the vacuuming on the weekend," Tezuka informed his mother, while Ryoma started wishing that he could disappear into his chair.

The woman's eyes turned steely. "Did you now?"

Not sure if this was the right answer, the freshman nodded slowly.

"Kunimitsu! How could let you a guest do the cleaning?!"

"Most parents would be delighted over any teenage boy doing any cleaning at all," Kuniharu remarked as he nabbed a biscuit from the plate at the centre of the coffee table. Ryoma didn't correct him on his not-quite-yet-a-teenager status, and decided that he sort of liked Tezuka's father. He had all of the captain's common sense, without any of the stiff formality.

"Well, you needn't bother with that anymore, Echizen. But thank you for being an excellent houseguest. And I must say that I'm also very grateful to you for keeping our son company while we were away. We were quite anxious about leaving him on his own for the past couple of weeks."

Ryoma slouched a little, growing nervous at the sudden attention, golden eyes darting to the senior for some sort of help. "Really, I should be the one thanking Buchou."

"I see. Kunimitsu mentioned that you'd been having problems at home..."

It was then that Ryoma realised that Tezuka's mother had been waiting for him to leave open an opportunity for that line of questioning. This was a cunning woman. It would be stupid to underestimate her just because she played the part of a loving housewife.

"Ayana," Kuniharu said warningly.

She frowned. "I just want to make certain that there isn't anything that needs to go through proper channels."

Ryoma remained silent. How else was he to respond?

"You don't trust our son's judgement in this matter?"

"Of course I trust Kunimitsu! But..."

"If it's trouble for you, I can find somewhere else to stay," Ryoma offered quietly, even though his stomach clenched at the thought. But it would be worse if he caused the captain trouble with his family, after everything the senior had done for him. They seemed like such nice people - having them argue over him really wasn't worth it.

"Don't even consider such a thing," Tezuka abruptly ordered, half-standing and surprising both of his parents into silence. Seeming to realise that he'd spoken out of turn, the senior settled back into his seat, regaining his composure, and instead stared evenly at him. Grand. This probably meant another lecture later.

Tezuka Ayana was looking genuinely concerned now. "Echizen-"

Kuniharu held up a hand with an easy-going smile. "You're welcome as long as you'd like to stay, Echizen. If Kunimitsu thinks that's the best way, then I trust his reasoning."

Ryoma's mouth felt dry. He swallowed and murmured, "Thank you." It was amazing, really, to see how trusted the senior was by his parents; but then, his senpai did practically ooze responsibility.

Talk after that was carefully steered back towards safer topics. Fortunately, there was little call for Ryoma to participate, though he was always careful to be polite and speak clearly and concisely whenever a question was directed his way. Watching the subtle family dynamic made him feel a little odd, though. It was so different to what he remembered of his own household - naturally, as Tezuka Kuniharu appeared to be a normal adult unlike his own perverted immature crazy father. And Tezuka Ayana was apparently a full-time housewife too, unlike Echizen Rinko who was rarely home. Different personalities would inevitably create a different atmosphere. But even though they weren't the most demonstrative family he'd ever seen, there was real warmth there, and they all seemed to genuinely like and care for one another. Ryoma felt a bit nauseous after

watching for a while, and was relieved when afternoon tea was apparently over and they were ordered off to do homework.

They hadn't thrown him out, or made things too difficult for his senpai so far, fortunately. But strangely, Ryoma almost would have felt better if they had.

Chapter 18

Author's Note: Due to the end of holidays, I'll probably be dropping back to one chapter every day or so for the rest of the fic. (Though I am slightly amused by the people who keep asking me to update soon? I've been posting multiple chapters a day. How much sooner do you want me to update? :P)

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 18

Dinner that night was an even more awkward affair than afternoon tea - for Ryoma, anyway. He found himself somewhat lost when they went downstairs and discovered the table already set and the food laid out. The Tezuka family ate mostly in silence, occasionally making light, impersonal dinner conversation, which was at least nicer than the usual interrogations the captain gave him over meal times. But the whole affair still didn't sit quite right. He and Tezuka had settled into something of a routine over the past two weeks - he'd set the table while the captain organised the food, then he'd also do the dishes and clean up afterwards. The senior's mother continually shooed him away, though.

It stood to reason - he really was a guest and an outsider, after all. But Ryoma had grown sort of comfortable in the captain's house over the past fortnight, even after continually telling himself not to get too used to it. The sudden sensation of being an intruder fell upon him again all at once, and so he was relieved when Tezuka ordered him upstairs to take a bath.

The senior, for his part, waited until he could hear the running water in the bathroom before heading back to the kitchen where his mother was wiping down the stovetop. He hovered awkwardly in the entranceway and cleared his throat. His mother had seen him, he knew, but was patiently waiting for him to gather his thoughts and speak his mind. "About Echizen... please let him help with the housework."

She immediately ceased her cleaning and stared at him with an almost horrified expression. "Kunimitsu! Why would you suggest such a thing? He's a guest!"

Tezuka shook his head. "That's exactly why. Echizen is normally..." He spent a moment searching for a nicer word than 'lazy'. "... less than enthusiastic about extra work, but in these circumstances it seems to make him feel better to contribute something to the household."

She wrung out a dishcloth, a frown marring her face. Not for the first time, Tezuka found himself wondering why she always looked so tired lately. Hopefully she was not overworking herself. "With Echizen's family, is it really-"

"He has a slightly complex family situation. It will not be easily resolved, but it is Echizen's wish that it remains private so that he can continue attending Seigaku. I'm sorry I can't give you more details. I promised to keep his confidence."

"I'm just glad he has you to confide in, then," she said softly. At his confused look, she smiled gently, beckoning him closer and tucking a stray strand of his hair back into place. "I already know that boy is no runaway. A mother can tell, you know. He was trying to hide it, but he was watching us with such a sad face during dinner."

Tezuka frowned. He had not been aware. Then again, the senior had been keeping more of an eye on the freshman's plate to make sure he ate properly - it hadn't escaped his notice that his charge's appetite hadn't been as healthy the day before.

"You just look out for him. In fact, I think it will do you some good. It will be a good distraction for you during this difficult time, and I think you could both use the support. Now shoo - upstairs with you. Leave me to my work in peace," she ordered with a smile.

Slightly befuddled, Tezuka retreated. His roommate, freshly bathed, had studiously immersed himself in a book in an out of the way corner of the room. The captain wondered if maybe he ought to discuss what his mother had thought was bothering the boy during dinner, but in the end awkwardness won out. He sat at his desk to get ahead on some assignments instead.

They went to bed that night without speaking.

The next morning, Tezuka tried to keep a closer eye on Echizen during breakfast, but couldn't see any expression other than sleepiness. His father had greeted him with a tired smile and opened the newspaper, while his mother hovered over the two of them, making sure they were set for the day. The senior waved it off, finding the behaviour a little unusual, but after seeing Ryoma's discomfiture at the mothering it made more sense. His mother was apparently trying to make up for the first-year's current lack of family in her own quiet way, even if it was probably making Echizen more upset rather than less.

Attendance at club that morning was at a record low - it had been quite cold, and Tezuka recalled that a large chunk of seniors had high school entrance practice exams that day. Most of the students would likely just make use of the ladder system to move on to Seigaku's high school - it was probably the best public school in the area - but those that wanted to try to get into the elite private schools or institutions closer to their homes would be studying rather intensely over the next two months. The regulars were still there, along with three other seniors, but the rest of the third-years were absent.

The day only became more unusual. During recent lunchtimes, Echizen had been meeting him in the cafeteria, whereupon Tezuka

would ensure that the freshman ate something, but there was no trace of the first-year that day. About halfway through the break the captain toyed with the idea of tracking the youth down to make sure nothing was wrong, but conceded that by the time he found the boy lunch was likely to over anyway. Fortunately, Ryoma seemed to be fine in practice that afternoon, setting growing concerns to rest.

Practice was called to a close relatively early. When everyone was changing in the locker rooms, Echizen approached him for the first time that day.

"Buchou."

"Yes?" he asked, pulling his attention away from his shirt buttons.

"I'm going out for burgers with Momo-senpai today."

It was surprising, but a relief. It had been quite some time since the freshman had last gone for burgers with his friend. Was Echizen finally going to return to a more normal pattern of behaviour? "Very well. Enjoy yourself. I'll see you back at home."

Ryoma just nodded and left the clubhouse. Tezuka took the opportunity to do some much-neglected student council work, then for the first time in a fortnight returned home alone.

Even though his mother was at home, the house felt incredibly empty. Apparently he had become used to having a shadow. Given how tired his parents looked that morning and the day before, Tezuka made a point of not bothering them, and instead retired to his room to focus on homework and assignments. Echizen turned up promptly as the sun was setting, blushed at Ayana greeting him home and asking about his day, and retreated to the captain's bedroom to work on homework until dinnertime.

Tezuka was relieved that his parents had taken to Ryoma so well. There had never been any doubt about their acceptance - they would never turn away someone who needed assistance. Neither of

them were gossips either, so he knew they would respect the younger boy's privacy and the delicacy of his situation. Tezuka also rarely asked favours of them, and thus was confident that they would grant him this one. Still, it had eased his lingering concerns when Echizen had apparently summoned some manners out of thin air, and his parents in turn took a liking to the younger boy - with his mother quietly fretting over him and his father apparently enjoying the prospect of someone actually smiling at his remarks. Yes, things seemed to be going well in that quarter.

It was a little odd when Echizen didn't join him for lunch *again* the next day, though, and spent that afternoon out as well. And then repeated this pattern for the rest of the week. The return to a familiar routine should have been reassuring, but the abruptness of it left Tezuka feeling suddenly uneasy.

Then on Friday, his mother met him at the door with another surprise announcement.

"You're returning to Kyushu? But you've only been back for a couple of days." There were suitcases gathered in the foyer. Apparently they were leaving soon. His gut began to clench with worry. "Is grandfather-"

"It's just a minor complication," his mother said soothingly. "But you know how your father is..."

"Wasn't the operation supposed to be low-risk?" he asked, distress growing.

"Well, yes, but your grandfather is getting rather old... we'll be in contact. I've re-stocked the fridge, and left some money on your desk. Call us if you need anything. Take good care of Echizen while we're away, okay?" She bustled around the foyer, checking last minute things, while her son stood awkwardly off to the side.

Really, telling him to take care of Echizen was ridiculous, as he'd been doing that for a fortnight already without their help. "You're

leaving *today* ?"

"As soon as your father gets home, yes. Hand me my bag, will you?"

Passing over the handbag wordlessly, Tezuka tried to ignore the growing dread and sensation of wrongness.

Echizen returned to the empty house later that evening, surprised at the sudden turn of events. Wide eyes remained fixed on his face as he relayed the change of circumstances, before averting away as the freshman stuck his hands in his pockets.

"... Is your grandfather going to be okay?"

Tezuka swallowed, and turned his attention to serving out the dinner his mother had left in the oven for them. "They said it was only a minor complication."

"... Are you worried?"

The hand serving out the rice paused briefly, then resumed ladling. "A little." If he expected Ryoma to be honest with him, it was necessary to respond in kind.

"Hn... you're close to your grandfather." It was made as a statement, as though the freshman was recalling a past conversation.

"Yes."

"What's he like?"

When asked that question, one could never produce a proper answer. "He's very traditional and... disciplined. He's the judo instructor at the local police department. Until he had to take time off for this, at least."

"Hm. Sounds like an impressive person."

"Yes."

They didn't talk for the rest of dinner.

Echizen was scarce again for most of the next day, which drove Tezuka slightly stir-crazy, as the youth was a rather effective distraction from his increasing worry - or at least an effective means of displacing it. His parents called during the day, but were rather vague when he asked details, and when he had wanted to speak to his grandfather, was informed that he was sleeping. It would have eased his concerns considerably to actually exchange even a few words, but as it currently stood he'd only spoken to his grandfather once since the operation, and it was starting to bother him.

When Echizen spent Sunday out at some undisclosed location for most of the day that bothered him too. In the end, he chose to worry about Echizen first, because he could actually *do* something about that.

Chapter 19

Author's Note: This chapter is another one of my personal favourites, despite its saccharinity. A longer one this time, to make up for last chapter's shortness.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 19

The streets courts were thankfully, for once, devoid of any familiar presence.

Ryoma absently kicked a loose twig off an empty court and shrugged his racket bag off his shoulder. It was only mid Sunday afternoon, and there were a few hours to kill yet before he could return to the Tezuka household. While a good opponent would have been preferable for tennis practice, he was better off just hitting a ball against a wall and thinking for the time being. There were contingency plans that needed to be made.

Ryoma was a practical person. He knew that he wouldn't be able to rely on Tezuka forever. It was a selfish imposition on his captain as it was - he'd already invaded his private space for half a month. If their situations had been reversed, he doubted that he would have been nearly as accommodating. Tezuka had assured him more than once that he was hardly a hassle, but Ryoma wasn't convinced. After all, he understood that their captain was a private person - he was too - and as such, he probably desired more time to himself without an underclassman always cramping his style. He'd more or less already suggested that, hadn't he? So the first year had started making a concerted effort to give his senpai time alone, steering clear of him

while at school and spending several afternoons and evenings a week out. On Saturday when he had coaching at the junior tennis club he left early and came back late. On Sunday he quietly went about the house doing some cleaning in the morning, then escaped to the street courts for the rest of the day.

He hoped that Tezuka appreciated it because it created an awkward position for him. School afternoons he could normally blast with Momoshiro and Kikumaru, or he could visit the aforementioned street courts and get in some extra practice. But returning to Tezuka's when not walking with the senior felt intrusive, like knocking on the door of a friend's house in the middle of a private family gathering. Presumptuous, even. And ever since the senior's parents had both returned and left, his irrational fear had returned tenfold that Tezuka would greet him at the door with his bags, kicking him out all over again.

The ball pelted against the rebound wall, making a healthy 'thwack' with every hit with the racket. While his mind was occupied, his body made the small adjustments necessary to keep the ball returning to the same spot after a gust of wind, and then again when he'd hit a little harder than normal, breaking the rhythm.

Lunchtimes were no real problem. He'd only shadowed the senior for a couple of weeks, so it wasn't too hard to slide back into his previous lunch routine of either hanging out by himself on the roof or getting in some extra tennis practice. It was only been on the weekend when the other regulars had plans with their families that he found himself at a loss, aimlessly wandering with that sickening feeling of homelessness settling over him again.

It made him think. What would he do on holidays? Tezuka's parents might want to go travelling, and surely they'd bring their son along? He wouldn't be able to intrude on something like that, and he wouldn't feel right staying in their house by himself, either - if they even let him. Sure, Tezuka's parents had been terribly nice to him so far, but they *were* incredibly polite people - they probably wouldn't say anything to his face. After all, he was by no means a perfect

guest, even if he'd been trying especially hard. His polite Japanese was barely passable, and he was sure they thought him rude and uncouth, especially next to their own infallible son. He wasn't cute or endearing or likeable, nor was he making any significant contributions to the household beyond what little cleaning Tezuka Ayana would allow. His pride didn't like relying so heavily on the hospitality of other people. It was one thing to mooch burgers; it was another matter altogether to be almost entirely dependent on someone else. He never wanted to be so dependent on anybody ever again. Dependency on his parents had been what crippled him so badly in the first place. No, it was better to be separate, to be able to stand on his own two feet no matter the situation.

That was what he preferred, but what other choice was there currently? Tezuka hadn't even let him... reimburse him. He blushed again at the memory. It had taken him days to work up the nerve to offer, too! That awkward moment was going to haunt him forever.

Abruptly, he realised that his hand was still, and the tennis ball had rolled to the edge of the concrete. The sun was starting to set - it was probably time to go back. With a sigh, Ryoma retrieved the ball, put his racket back in its bag, and began to slowly amble back towards his temporary home. He didn't *want* to be dependent, he really didn't. But at the same time, without Tezuka's presence it was too quiet. Which was ridiculous, because it wasn't like the senior spoke very much.

They only exchanged a few sentences at dinner that night - did your homework get done, what did you do today, what's happening at practice tomorrow? - then went to bed in silence.

Tezuka, for his part, was focusing most of his attention on Echizen once again, since that seemed to be the most productive place for it these days. At lunchtime on Monday, rather than let the freshman remain conspicuously absent and throw Inui's data into further disarray, he sought the youth out, just to make sure he was eating.

Frustratingly, Ryoma was found on the roof. "Echizen!" he barked.

Echizen started, and glanced over in surprise. "Buchou?"

"Lunch. You're supposed to be eating." A lot of effort had been involved getting his charge back onto a regular diet. Backsliding was dangerous. The concern that there truly was something bothering Ryoma intensified.

Echizen seemed aware that he'd been caught out, so quietly followed along without complaint to the cafeteria. However, he only stayed long enough to exchange a few words with a curious Inui and eat the food Tezuka gave him before taking off to who-knew-where again. It was quite frustrating, especially when the senior had to repeat the same process the next day.

Tuesday night, they went to bed early in silence again. Tezuka, however, found himself unable to sleep.

It had been a surreal week; given the recent string of events that was no surprise. The past month felt longer than your average year. While managing the house on his own during his grandfather's health crisis, he'd somehow acquired responsibility for one his regulars, had to question his own sexuality after being propositioned by said regular, and was now apparently being ignored by the very same regular.

His thoughts lingered on that for a while. Maybe Echizen was just embarrassed? It was a reasonable assumption. Tezuka still wasn't quite sure what to make of his own reaction to that kiss, the whole affair being rather overshadowed by the horrifying notion of how close the freshman had come to turning himself into a prostitute. But things had more or less returned to normal after a few days. The mood only changed again when his parents had returned home. Or had it been just before that?

Tezuka lay in bed staring into the inky blackness, unable to sleep with all the thoughts and worries whirling through his consciousness. He had discovered that the bedside lamp wasn't bright enough to wake his roommate, but dismissed the idea of reading. The rustle of

blankets from the futon on the floor indicated that Echizen was also still awake anyway. Debating with himself, the senior finally decided that now was as good a time as any for a conversation, since apparently neither of them could sleep.

"Echizen, is there a problem?" Tezuka asked, voice piercing the stillness.

Another rustle of blankets - probably Ryoma rolling over onto his back. "You're still awake, Buchou?"

"Obviously. Don't avoid the question."

There was silence as Echizen contemplated that, before he replied hesitantly, "There's no problem."

"You've been avoiding me."

"I- That's-"

Tezuka sat up in bed. It was too dark to see his roommate, but he turned in his general direction anyway. "I just want to know why."

No reply. Sighing, Tezuka threw back his sheets and got out of bed. There was no way he'd get to sleep now without some sort of closure. He stepped over to Ryoma's futon, kneeling on the floor and hesitantly reaching out to where he expected the freshman's shoulder to be. He missed, and wound up brushing a cheek instead. Glad that the darkness of the room hid his embarrassed blush, he settled his hand firmly on Echizen's left shoulder, ignoring the way the youth's body tensed at his touch. "Tell me."

One thing he had learned over the past few weeks was that the only way to get any personal information from Echizen was to forcibly drag it out of him. Normally, he was inclined to mind his own business in such matters, but when issues involved him directly - or, for that matter, Echizen's well being - he was more than willing to apply Fuji-like pressure to extract the full story. Especially given his

underclassman's stubborn pride - even under scrutiny he'd omit vastly important details from his stories.

Tonight Echizen was being particularly stubborn. "I haven't been avoiding you." He'd resorted to denial.

"Don't lie to me. You have. Tell me why. I promise I won't be mad."

"I- I've just been busy is all. You are too."

"Echizen," Tezuka insisted, slightly unnerved by his roommate's stubbornness in this regard. It was well known that Ryoma could be terribly pig-headed at times, but the freshman nearly always capitulated to his demands. "Talk."

"There's nothing to talk about."

Tezuka sighed, rubbing his eyes. Normally in a situation like this, he'd back off and leave it alone, but he *couldn't* do it now. It directly involved him, for one. And secondly, he already had first hand proof of what happened when he and Ryoma didn't communicate clearly. He still regretted the anguish his simple words 'become Seigaku's pillar' had caused the first year when the chance to go to the US Open had presented itself. It had been fortunate that he had figured out his protégé's misunderstanding before things became any worse; he was determined not to repeat that fiasco again.

Tezuka didn't really want to pull the guilt-tripping card on Echizen, but it was getting late and he was running out of ways to get him to talk. So he hardened his tone, and said, "If something is bothering you, Echizen, you talk about it. That's the rules. I might not be here as your tennis captain right now, but I am here as master of this house." He resisted the urge to wince at how harshly his wording came out.

It didn't work quite the way he expected. Echizen sat up and left the bed suddenly. "I'm sorry, Buchou."

Tezuka fumbled for the bedside lamp, filling the room with a weak orange glow - enough to see a pyjama-clad Ryoma tugging his duffel bag out of the closet. "What are you doing?"

"I'll go back to the clubhouse. I was managing fine there - it worked out pretty well," Echizen announced.

"It did not and you won't," Tezuka ordered, grabbing his wrist and pulling him away from the door. Ryoma stumbled backwards, tripping over the end of the futon and tumbling to the floor, bringing the still-attached captain with him. They hit the ground with a dull thud, half missing the soft futon; though Tezuka had a considerably softer landing, having picked up the lion's share of the bedding.

The senior lay still for a long moment, with his underclassman still attached at the wrist. Once he sorted which way was up and which was down, he pushed himself up using his free arm, but didn't otherwise shift. "Are you okay?"

"Let go."

"No."

They remained there in silence for a long moment - Echizen with his head turned and eyes staring off to the side and Tezuka studying him intently. Finally, the senior stated, "Please don't take what I said literally. I don't want you out on the streets."

"I don't want to be there either! That's why I've been giving you your privacy!" Ryoma suddenly blurted.

What? "Is that why you've been avoiding me?"

"It's not that I don't want to hang out with you," Echizen mumbled. "But you're a senior, right? I didn't think you'd want a freshman hanging around all the time."

Tezuka strangely found himself wanting to laugh in relief. Echizen was just insecure. Not a word he ever expected to use to describe the first-year, true, but then again Echizen was just as human as everyone else, as he'd been repeatedly reminded lately. "How many times must I say it? You're honestly no trouble at all." He shifted to the side, pulling Ryoma onto the futon with him, and then rolling onto his back so that they were both looking at the ceiling. Eye contact seemed like it would break the temporary spell.

"Even if I was, you'd just say that to placate me. Your parents too. You whole family is so polite. It's impossible to know what any of you are thinking."

"Untrue. My family prizes honesty above manners. My parents really are grateful for your presence, because it means that they are less worried about leaving me alone while they are away. And I've grown accustomed to having a live-in training partner and English translator." It was a feeble attempt at a joke to lighten the situation, but Tezuka suspected that Echizen hadn't even picked up on it. "Ryoma?" he prodded, rolling his head to the side. The freshman had slung an arm over his eyes, and was biting his bottom lip so hard the skin was turning white.

After a moment, he stated, "You've never called me that before."

He hadn't- oh. Tezuka frowned, thinking back. Come to think of it, he'd started thinking of Ryoma by his first name half the time recently, but he supposed that was the first instance of him actually saying it aloud. "Hm, I suppose you're right. Does it bother you?"

"... No. Just sort of wondering why."

"We're friends, aren't we?"

"Are we?"

"I should think so. We've been sharing a room for the past couple of weeks, and might I point out that also you stole my first kiss. Surely

that qualifies you for first name basis?"

There was the slightest hint of a smile on Ryoma's face. "That was your first?"

"It wasn't yours?"

"Right, sorry. Though I'm not sure if friends normally kiss each other, Buchou."

"Perhaps not," he admitted. It was the first time they'd actually discussed that whole awkward affair. "But I would consider our circumstances a little unusual, in any case. And for that matter, you're entitled to the same right."

"Kunimitsu," Ryoma tested, as though tasting the word, then made a face. "Too weird. Buchou will always be Buchou."

"Whatever you say."

"You can call me Ryoma, though. I grew up in America, you know. Still not used to everyone calling me Echizen."

Tezuka rolled onto his side, propping his head up with his elbow so that he could stare at the freshman. "Ryoma it is, then."

They sat there in companionable silence for a couple of minutes. It was past midnight, and they both really ought to have been sleeping - there was school in the morning, after all - but the room suddenly seemed cut adrift from the real world, and Tezuka was reluctant to break the illusion.

"I didn't know anyone when I came to Seigaku. Everything was different. Then I joined the tennis club," Ryoma broke the silence suddenly. His voice sounded impossibly small in the quiet room. "All I seemed to do was alienate everyone I came across. I don't get along very well with most people, so I sort of expected it. That was okay. I was used to it."

Tezuka wanted to speak up, but it was so rare to get Echizen talking about himself willingly that he didn't dare break the flow, lest he clam up again. So he just let his hand start stroking the youth's hair in what he hoped was a soothing manner. It was soothing for him, at least, so at least one of them would stay calm.

"But then, after the first tournament... people started to worm their way in. It was Momo-senpai who was first. Then slowly, as we played more and more matches, the rest of the regulars followed. For the first time, I was really part of a team. I hadn't realised that being part of team - not just included in one because I was the strongest - would feel so good. It was camaraderie. And that was when I realised that I'd never had friends until I'd come to Seigaku. Somehow, I hadn't noticed before."

Only the sound of breathing broke the steady silence. Tezuka cleared his throat as though to speak, but paused, sensing that there was more to come.

"And then... then the U.S. Open came," Ryoma paused, and then continued in almost a whisper. "All of a sudden, everyone started telling me to forget about the Nationals, to go for the U.S. Open, to take this big chance. Everyone just assumed that I would, and they seemed shocked when I didn't want to, and tried to reassure me that they could manage at the Nationals without me. In the end, I caved to the pressure. Because it was then that all of a sudden, I found myself alone again."

The senior's hand stilled its motion by its own volition. Tezuka felt his breath catch in his throat.

Echizen seemed to curl in on himself, voice growing tight as though he was about to cry - but of course, the freshman had too much self-control for that. "I'd been excited about going to the Nationals. I wanted to be part of the team, to be the pillar that you'd asked me to be. But then everyone was telling me that I wasn't needed, that I wasn't wanted, that I was too good to hang out with them. It was like all those months of friendship never happened."

"That was never the intention," Tezuka almost blurted. "Everybody was just afraid of holding you back."

"I know," Ryoma replied in a small voice. "I know that, Buchou. But even knowing that.... I still felt like I'd suddenly been abandoned, and I don't know how to be alone anymore! I don't know!"

The senior did not miss the sudden - quite accidental, he guessed - slip into present tense.

Ryoma was lonely. It stood to reason. Really, aside from his cousin, all he had left now were the other regulars, and out of all those Tezuka was the only one who knew about his situation. Then he had deliberately alienated himself from his only source of company for fear of losing it altogether. Honestly, for all his rationality, Echizen's logic could be terribly convoluted outside of tennis. Then again, this was the same mind that originally proposed *reversing* the Tezuka zone, so perhaps it wasn't that surprising.

The next words were almost a whisper. "I don't want to leave. But I don't want to be dependent, either. I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not a burden. And there's no shame in relying on others," the senior stated firmly.

"But they'll just let you down. If it happens again-"

There were more levels to Ryoma's insecurities than he'd first guessed. He supposed he couldn't blame him - the entire situation still felt temporary, and he expected that Ryoma probably spent a great deal of time wondering what would become of him when circumstances changed. Honestly, though, he'd stressed them both out for no reason.

"It won't. I won't fail you," he murmured into green-black hair. "I won't let you down. That's what being the pillar of Seigaku is all about."

Surprisingly, that elicited something that sounded awfully like to a chuckle from the freshman. Shaking his head, the senior grabbed the blankets and pulled them over him. "Enough of this. Go to sleep," he ordered, clambering back into his own bed and reaching for the bedside lamp. The room was plunged back into darkness again.

They settled back down, getting comfortable again. The windowpanes rattled slightly under a gust of breeze.

"Buchou?" Ryoma called out into the darkness.

"What?"

"Earlier... were you just joking about the 'live-in training partner and English translator' thing?"

The corners of Tezuka's lips quirked into what could have been a smile; not that it was visible in the darkness. "Partly. It can't be a coincidence that my English marks have improved since you moved in."

Ryoma snorted. "Improved to where? Weren't you already at the top of the class?"

"Not at all. Fuji has been top of the class in English since our first year, followed by Kawamura. They are both rather put out over being nudged out of their positions. Of course, they don't know that I have fluent speaker looking over my shoulder criticising my work every day."

"Che, sorry."

"Don't be. Didn't I just say my marks have improved?"

"Heh."

Eventually, the steady breathing from the futon grew quiet and even, and the senior allowed himself to drift off. It was so late that there

didn't seem any point in going to sleep anymore, but Tezuka thought it was worth it.

Chapter 20

Author's Note: Please don't hate me for this chapter. :(It's a really short one, too.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 20

They were both quite tardy to practice on Wednesday morning. It earned them more than a few confused glances, but Tezuka had sort of expected it after their late night heart-to-heart. He barely stifled a yawn as he ordered the juniors into drills.

"More drills?" Ryoma muttered next to him under his breath.

Tezuka's lips quirked. "Coach's orders."

Heaving a sigh, Ryoma left his side to join the other regulars in their stretches. Tezuka didn't follow suit - he'd just be supervising. Given how little sleep had been had the night before, that was probably a good thing. It looked like Inui had broken out the juice again.

Still, despite the sort of cold, fuzzy feeling generally associated with too little sleep dogging him, Tezuka felt immeasurably lighter. Ryoma had spoken with him freely and honestly the night before, possibly for the first time. Certainly, he was no Oishi, but he could handle these matters - in Ryoma's case, anyway. The senior expected it was easier with Ryoma simply because he'd come to know the freshman that well. It still struck him as absurd, though - that Echizen, of all people, was probably his closest friend. And though it was presumptuous of him to even think it, the reverse was likely true as well.

A warm resolve filled him. Ryoma would not regret granting him his deepest trust. He would make sure of it.

It was a relief when the freshman appeared by his side at lunchtime without having to be dragged to the cafeteria - a confirmation of sorts that things really were sorted out. They went through the line, getting food, and joined the other seniors at the table. Ryoma took nearly half of his lunch this time, eliciting a raised eyebrow from Fuji, and Tezuka made a mental note that now that Echizen's appetite was starting to return to more normal levels, they'd probably have to start thinking of an alternate arrangement for lunch. His parents had left enough money for both of them, but over the past couple of weeks sharing lunch like this had become habit.

"Echizen, Tezuka," Inui greeted them both with a nod, scribbling in his notebook with one hand while eating with the other. The others nodded hello as well, not breaking their conversation. Most of it was revolving around schoolwork. Inevitably, though, the topic eventually drifted towards tennis.

"It can't be too long until the first snow," Oishi worried. "There's been frost the past two mornings, even though it's still nice during the day."

"It's not like club activities will stop altogether," Kawamura pointed out, though they could all see that he was feeling a little gloomy at the prospect. Tezuka recalled the power player's repeated statements that this was going to be his last year playing tennis seriously, instead choosing to focus on his sushi-making. Though he approved of his classmate's devotion to his ambition, it was sad to think that even if the rest of them continued, they were still going to lose a part of their team.

"Indeed. Statistically speaking, on average snow does not fall until the end of December here and will not stick until mid-January. We likely have at least a few more weeks until the first flurries arrive." Inui adjusted his glasses. "Though I expect we will be stopping morning practices before that, Tezuka?"

The captain nodded. "According to Coach Ryuuzaki, this week will be the last of the morning practices." Even if the courts remained clear, the low temperature would eventually have too great an effect on the bounce of a ball.

"Hoi! It'll be nice to sleep in. And you won't have to worry about being late, Ochibi!" Kikumarū sang.

Ryoma just frowned.

"Ah, but Echizen's been early to practice for a while now!" Oishi remarked cheerfully. "Except for this morning, of course."

"You were late too, right, Tezuka?" Fuji asked interestedly.

"Hn." He couldn't really explain that they had come to school together without explaining why, and doing so would be breaking Ryoma's trust.

"Momo was so relieved! He was soooo late, and all worried about the laps he was going to have to run!" Kikumarū bubbled, almost bouncing in his seat, then paused. "Um, I don't think I was supposed to say that."

"Don't worry about it," Oishi assured his doubles partner.

"Though with so little time left, we're running out of chances to finish our match, right Echizen?" Fuji asked.

"Che. You'll lose," the first-year remarked confidently.

"Ryoma," Tezuka chided. Even if he'd earned the right to be arrogant, it did not mean that he should be.

Inui dropped his pen. The sudden silence at the table was deafening.

Frowning, he glanced at the others, wondering at their slack-jawed expressions. What... ah. It had been more natural for him to slip into first-name basis with the freshman than he'd thought. In any case,

Ryoma seemed quietly pleased - likely appreciating the confirmation of friendship in public with witnesses, given his recent insecurity.

"It's true," the freshman pointed out, apparently deciding to ignore the others' stunned faces.

Fuji was the first to recover. "We'll just have to play to find out, I suppose." With a serene smile, he turned to Tezuka. "I must say, though, I'm... surprised." He didn't elaborate on what had surprised him. There apparently wasn't a need.

Tezuka pretended not to notice anyway. "Hm?"

Oishi fidgeted, obviously not wanting to offend his friend, but battling with his curiosity at the same time. "Oh, it's just... how long..." He couldn't bring himself to say it out loud.

"In his time at Seigaku, Tezuka has never once referred to anyone by their first name," Inui mumbled.

It occurred to Tezuka belatedly that his friends, Oishi in particular, might be slightly offended that he'd come to call Ryoma by his first name in a comparatively short time, yet still referred to all of them by their last names. Honestly, it hadn't been something he'd ever considered before. Oishi regularly called Kikumarū by his first name after all, but his doubles partner didn't respond in kind, and almost everyone called Kawamura 'Taka', too. He expected a brief moment of surprise, but not this awkward confusion they were all displaying.

Perhaps it would be best to act nonchalant over the issue. "Ah, that. It's only recent. I didn't even notice, originally."

"Echizen has been eating lunch with us a lot lately, right?" Kawamura asked cheerfully.

"Almost every day for the past couple of weeks," Inui reported, retrieving his pen and scribbling furiously in his notebook. "My data

has been thrown into disarray," he muttered to himself a moment later. "I will need to adjust the rest of my statistics accordingly."

"What brought about the change?" Fuji asked Ryoma congenially. "I would have thought you'd be more interested in eating with Momo or the other freshmen." The question was innocent enough, but Tezuka was growing wary of the line of the conversation was taking. They couldn't really explain that he'd started dragging the first-year to lunch to ensure that he ate properly without having to explain a great many other things.

Fortunately Ryoma was two steps ahead of him. "Che, they'll all be here next year. There are only a couple of months left before all of you leave."

"OCHIBI! You're so sweet!" Kikumarū bawled, wresting the freshman into a tight hug that more closely resembled a headlock. "Don't worry, we'll still be around! We'll be friends forever!"

"Eiji! You're choking him!" Oishi fretted, trying to pry his doubles partner loose. It was difficult to tell whether Ryoma's face was red from blushing or lack of oxygen.

The bell signalling the end of lunch trilled then, rescuing them from further interrogation. Ryoma extricated himself from the acrobat's grasp in order to join the other freshmen, while the seniors broke apart and made their way to their own classrooms. Despite how close his teammates had wandered near sensitive topics, Tezuka was in a rather good mood, for once not totally consumed with worry for his charge.

This was not to last.

"Tezuka," his teacher said, stopping him as he made to enter the classroom, "You're to head to the main office straight away."

"Pardon?" It wasn't as though he didn't get called to the offices fairly often - either as captain of the tennis club, or for student council

duties - but it was rarely so sudden.

"Hurry along," the teacher prompted him softly. Bewildered, the senior complied; walking briskly through the emptying halls towards the main office, mind cooking up any number of potential - though unlikely - scenarios. It wasn't anything to do with Ryoma, was it? No, that was ridiculous. He'd just seen the freshman not ten minutes ago.

The vice-principal was waiting for him. "Tezuka, good. Please, enter." The man looked unusually solemn. His apprehension grew.

To his surprise, his mother was waiting for him in the office. What? Wasn't she supposed to still be in Kyushu? "Oh, Kunimitsu, you have to come quickly. I've already packed you a bag. We'll go straight to the station - we have to transfer, there weren't any available flights on such short notice," she blurted, standing and taking his arm when he entered and steering him back into the hallway, voice quick and low.

His heart leapt into his throat as the dots started to connect and dread settled in the pit of his stomach.

"School?" he asked.

"I just spoke with your teachers. Now come quickly," she prompted.

For her to pull him out of school... "... Mother?"

She pursed her lips, and looked at him softly. "It's your grandfather. They said we ought to hurry and bring any close friends and family members as soon as possible. Your father's still there."

That worry that had been brewing slowly in his gut over the past couple of weeks suddenly curdled, and Tezuka felt physically ill. Shocked into silence, he hurriedly followed his mother from the school. He didn't remember arriving at the train station, or boarding

the train, or any of the scenery that went past. He was having trouble thinking of anything at all.

Fifteen hours later, in the early hours of the morning in Kyushu, Tezuka Kunikazu passed away at age 73 with his family at his side.

Chapter 21

Author's Note: Made up for the short cruel chapter yesterday with this longer, fluffier one today. CAVITY WARNING.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 21

The next twenty-four hours passed in a flurry of confusion, sadness and grieving.

After arriving in Kyushu his mother had taken him straight to the hospital, where he'd spoken in private with his grandfather for a time, left for a while so that two of Kunikazu's friends could have a moment with him, then resumed vigil by his bedside into the night. His grandfather passed away in the early hours of the morning. Tezuka helped his mother and father make the calls to the relevant people, and then assisted in organising to have the body delivered back home for the funeral. They caught several hours of sleep at the hotel before catching a dawn flight back home, by which point some of the numbness began to wear off.

Privately, the senior admitted to himself that he had suspected this outcome, even if he hadn't wanted to admit it. Despite the fact that not even six months prior his grandfather held his usual judo instruction as normal and managed fine, Tezuka had noticed the other's man somewhat abrupt decline in health, and so was not surprised when his parents informed him that Kunikazu required an operation.

Both of his parents assured him that the procedure was simple, though his grandfather had been reticent on the subject. That was when Tezuka first became suspicious that things were worse than they appeared. Then when his parents went to Kyushu for the operation also, and stayed there for a number of weeks... as much as he had tried to ignore the concern, it did not go away. Were he less understanding, he might have been upset by his family's efforts to shield him from the possibility of his grandfather's death, but in all honesty, Tezuka had come to the realisation several years ago that the man wouldn't be around forever, no matter how healthy he seemed for his age. It kept his reactions in check and rational.

He had grieved, and did not doubt that he would grieve further, but mentally, he'd at least been prepared for the eventuality. It was still shocking when his mother had turned up at school, and it all happened faster than he could have expected, but he'd at least been able to say his goodbyes. Though the memory of the sight of that strong, alert individual reduced to a weak, frail old man on a hospital bed left Tezuka more shocked than the actual event of his grandfather's death.

They were all tired when they arrived back home in the morning. The sun seemed far too bright. His father quietly retired to his room, while his mother started making more phone calls, trying to arrange matters so that they could hold the funeral ceremony on Sunday. Tezuka lingered in the kitchen. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Oh, Kunimitsu," she said with a tired smile. "You've already done more than enough. Your father and I can handle the rest - and some of your grandfather's students from work have offered their help as well. You take a rest."

"I don't think I'd really feel right just being idle," he confessed.

"Of course not. Then why don't you go to school?"

He glanced at the clock. There was still enough time to make it. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I'm sure none of your teachers will mind if you miss another day of classes, but maybe seeing your friends... You could use a break to take your mind off things. Go on ahead." She shooed him from the kitchen.

Tezuka stood in the foyer for a couple of minutes, indecisive. He wasn't entirely certain if he wanted to go to school - how on earth could he be expected to concentrate on classes? - but eventually concluded that yes, seeing his team mates would make him feel a little better. His grandfather had sternly told them all not to wallow and mope around, and though the senior had the feeling that those words were mostly directed towards his father, he was still going to do his best to try and honour them. Even if he felt guilty for doing so.

Even though the flight had delivered them home far quicker than the train, Tezuka still didn't arrive until close to the end of morning practice. Thus, his arrival garnered plenty of attention.

"Tezuka-buchou! You're back!" Momoshiro exclaimed.

The other regulars clustered around him, abandoning their drills. "Tezuka, what happened? You never came to afternoon classes on Wednesday. Where have you been? Is everything alright?" Oishi fretted.

"Ryuuzaki-sensei didn't tell you?"

"She merely informed us that it was a personal matter," Inui reported. He looked like he was itching to start spouting percentages, but held his tongue.

"It was my grandfather. He passed away."

They all stared at him in shocked silence. Oishi was the first to speak, laying a tentative hand on his shoulder. "Oh, Tezuka, I'm sorry. You mentioned that he was going to have an operation, but I had no idea..."

"Are you okay?" Fuji asked softly.

He nodded stiffly. "Thank you for your concern."

"If there's anything you need..." Kawamura offered tentatively.

"I'll let you know," he confirmed. "But it's alright, really. I was able to say my goodbyes. And I knew he wasn't well." He didn't quite believe his own words, and by the look on Oishi's face, he didn't either. The rest of the regulars backed off a little though, looking awkward and muttering a smattering of generic condolences.

Having come to school precisely to get his mind off the whole sad affair instead of focusing on it, he turned his attention to the courts. Coach Ryuuzaki - apparently taking a more active role in his absence - was ordering everyone back to drills, but something seemed out of place. That's right...

Tezuka could feel the colour draining from his face in horror.

He had forgotten about Ryoma.

He'd just vanished from school; whisked off to Kyushu to hold vigil at his grandfather's bedside. Afterwards, he'd been so exhausted from the lack of sleep, so consumed with his grief and helping his parents that he hadn't even spared a thought for Ryoma until now. It had all been so sudden, so shocking, so fast...

Tezuka hadn't even called the freshman to let him know what happened. How could he have been so irresponsible?

His mind stalled, though. What was he so worried about? Ryoma was pretty good at managing by himself - the youth had survived for an entire month on his own, after all, and at least now he possessed a part-time job and food and shelter.

Shaking his head as though to clear it, Tezuka asked, "Where's Echizen?"

Momoshiro paused at that, and scratched his head. "Don't know. He's real late. Maybe he's sleeping in? He was a bit off colour yesterday."

To everyone else, this wasn't so unusual - until his recent trend of earliness, Ryoma was always one of the last to arrive at morning practice. But Tezuka froze as yet another horrible revelation dawned on him.

He had never given Echizen the spare key to the house.

Panic seized him again in that instant. Where had Ryoma gone? Where could he look?

His eyes landed on the clubhouse. It was ridiculous. The others would have seen him in there when changing before practice. Unless...

"There isn't much time left for practice. Everybody go finish up your drills," he barked out, then hurried to the clubhouse. In the background, he could hear everyone scrambling to obey his orders, but his mind was solely focused on finding Ryoma.

Predictably, the clubhouse was empty, save for the various jackets and racket bags propped up against the shelves. Where could the freshman hide in the clubhouse, yet still go unnoticed even while everyone was getting changed?

Not the benches. Not the showers or toilets, either. That only left storage.

Tezuka carefully pushed the creaking door to the storage space open, nearly catching it on a broken ball basket that had been retired. It was dim and musty inside as always. He ran a critical eye over it. In the back of the supply cupboard there was the old picnic blanket. Tezuka remembered it being used once or twice before on team outings. Carefully stepping over a torn net and several busted tennis balls, he tried to pick the blanket up.

Sure enough, Echizen was curled up in it, apparently sleeping.

"Ryoma!" he exclaimed, crouching low and shaking his shoulder.
"Wake up."

Ryoma frowned and let out a grunt, but didn't otherwise react.

Tezuka glanced about the cupboard. It was rather cramped; the reason why the freshman was folded up into what had to be a rather uncomfortable position. What on earth had possessed his kouhai to take shelter in here? Unless...

Worriedly, Tezuka's felt Ryoma's forehead, and was alarmed to find it uncomfortably warm.

Guilt surged through him. Of course. It had been terribly cold and windy at night for the past week or so. In a proper house, it was of little consequence - people would perhaps only break out an extra blanket - but here, in the clubhouse, there was little to keep a person warm. And even worse, Ryoma's duffle bag was still at his house where he couldn't access it; couldn't even get an extra shirt to help ward off the chill. The only protections on hand were the clothes on his back and a ratty old blanket. He must have retired to the storage cupboard in hopes that the equipment and old broken nets would provide some extra insulation.

Carefully, Tezuka gathered up his quarry, keeping him wrapped in the moth-eaten blanket. He hooked an arm under his knees and another under his shoulders. Where to go? The infirmary?

The act of being picked up jolted Ryoma to awareness. "...
Buchou...?" he slurred, half-opening his eyes and staring at him blearily.

"Echizen."

"... I waited.... Outside... for hours... but you didn't come home.
Where were you?"

Guilt spiked through Tezuka again. "I'm sorry, Echizen. My grandfather passed away, and I had to go to Kyushu suddenly."

"Oh. 'M sorry. Wanted to meet him."

"I would have liked you to meet him too."

"... Where are we going?"

"Infirmary."

Growing more lucid, Ryoma shifted in his arms. "Hey, let me down, I can walk."

Tezuka obliged him, and the freshman stood shakily, letting out a single rasping cough and clutching the senior's shoulder for support while he regained his balance.

"Are you okay?"

"Will be." He stifled a sneeze.

"The infirmary," Tezuka prompted.

Infuriatingly, Ryoma just shook his head. "No."

"You're ill. You're developing a fever."

"They won't let me stay in the nurse's office all day. I'll just sleep in class."

Of course. It hadn't occurred to him, but the nurse would definitely try to send Echizen home, or call his parents to pick him up. Sighing and pinching the bridge of his nose, Tezuka compromised. "We'll go home, then."

"Huh? Don't you have school, Buchou?"

"I can afford to miss another day." He hadn't really felt like attending classes anyway, and only came so that he wouldn't be idle at home. Besides, looking after Echizen was more important. The guilt over forgetting to inform the first year of his absence was practically eating him alive.

Ryoma smirked weakly at that. " *You're* skipping school?"

"Hardly. I nearly didn't come in the first place. Let's go."

Tezuka went to inform his classmates that he wouldn't be attending school after all. Fuji fetched copies of the notes he'd taken for their classes and handed them over with a sympathetic look. That sorted, he started escorting his ill charge back home. The journey took a lot longer than normal, as Ryoma was listless and apparently a little dizzy, but determined to make it on his own without help. Tezuka thought it an apt metaphor for their larger problem.

Eventually, they arrived home. Ayana was understandably shocked to see them. Before Tezuka could admit to his transgression, Ryoma placated her concern by informing her that he'd stayed over at Momoshiro's house. Tezuka knew this was a lie, but held his tongue until he had the freshman settled in his room.

"The futon is fine," Ryoma complained listlessly after being ordered into the bed.

"You're ill. Take the bed. Besides, I'll work at my desk while you sleep."

"I don't need a baby-sitter. I'll be okay in a couple of hours."

Tezuka doubted it, but didn't argue. "You lied."

A confused frown, then... "Oh, about Momo-senpai's."

"You shouldn't have."

"Your mother would have just worried," Ryoma yawned sleepily, eyes drifting closed. "She's got enough to deal with. Don't want her to worry. She's nice."

Phrased like that, the senior couldn't bring himself to complain. "Don't go to sleep just yet. You should eat something first."

Echizen stayed awake long enough to slurp down some ramen before drifting off. Tezuka helped his mother with a few odds and ends of the funeral arrangements, periodically checking on his charge and then later catching up on some homework.

True to his word, Ryoma seemed a great deal better when he woke up in the afternoon. Tezuka merely shook his head in disbelief. The youth had a remarkable constitution to be able to shrug off what had been promising to be a severe cold with just a warm meal and a few hours of good rest. To be safe, the senior made him take a long, hot bath, and bullied him into relaxing for the rest of the evening. He knew he was taking another page out of Oishi's book, but was still rather frustrated with himself for his oversight. Ryoma had only barely opened up and started really trusting him, and then he made such a massive blunder. Would this damage their newfound rapport at all?

"You're not superhuman, you know."

Startled at the sudden pronouncement - could Echizen read minds now? - Tezuka glanced at the freshman, who just sighed and beckoned him to the bed. Confused, the senior complied with the request, seating himself on the edge next to where Ryoma was propped up with pillows. "It's all over your face. You don't have to worry so much. You've got enough to deal with as it is. Oishi-senpai has been a bad influence on you."

He raised an eyebrow. "He has?"

Ryoma rolled his eyes. "I'm just saying. You shouldn't look out for me at your own expense. It's stupid." He fidgeted awkwardly for a

moment, then blurted. "You said we were friends, right, *Kunimitsu* ? Let me look out for you some too." The last part was muttered in a barely audible mumble.

Tezuka found himself speechless. Eventually, he cleared his throat, and stated, "But you slept in the clubhouse for two nights. You got sick. I didn't even call."

The freshman huffed, crossing his arms and glaring at him. "Buchou. Your grandfather died. You're allowed to feel bad right now, but not because of me."

He started a little. It was the first time someone else had stated the truth so bluntly. Ryoma apparently didn't much care for the insensitivity of his statement, and just glared at him, as though *daring* him to keep feeling guilty.

"I got to say goodbye to him," Tezuka said instead.

Ryoma just kept his stare level, so the senior felt compelled to continue.

"I had time to get used to the idea, I think. Even if my parents kept telling me that the surgery was simple, I already knew that it wasn't - otherwise they wouldn't have both gone to Kyushu, and certainly not for so long."

A pair of hazel eyes regarded him at length, clearly disbelieving. Crawling out from under the covers and kneeling on the bed, the freshman hovered uncertainly for a moment, then grabbed his shoulders and pulled him into a hug.

"Sorry Buchou, I'm not much good with words," Ryoma muttered in his ear.

Tezuka didn't cry. He'd shed a few tears in private in Kyushu, and that had been enough. Still, his arms tightened around Ryoma as though he were an anchor, and he found the small hands rubbing

comforting circles on his back soothing. They sat silently like that for a long time.

Eventually, Tezuka relinquished his hold, feeling strangely better, and laid back on the bed. Ryoma pushed himself up so that he was sitting perpendicular to him, back against the wall, and started awkwardly patting his head.

Tezuka quirked his eyebrows, rolling his eyes up to stare at his roommate. "What are you doing?"

"Copying what you did for me when I was upset," Ryoma retorted, quite seriously. "Do you want me to stop?"

Tezuka shook his head no, shifting a little to use Ryoma's leg as a pillow, and closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation of those small, deft hands stroking his hair. It really was relaxing. "Don't trouble yourself on my account," he murmured, growing sleepy. He hadn't slept much in the past few days.

"Hmmm, just glad that I could actually do something for *you* for a change."

He cracked open an eye at that to stare at the freshman. His gaze met a pair of a soft golden eyes and a mouth with the edges just curved up into the very slightest of smiles. It was a pleasantly sincere expression. Seeing it honestly made Tezuka feel a whole lot better.

Chapter 22

Author's Note: In which Seigaku's suspicions reach fever pitch.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 22

Ryoma felt rather awkward attending the funeral of a man he'd never met, but both Tezuka and his parents had insisted that he attend, as he was 'a member of the household'. He didn't want to be rude and disagree, but it was still baffling. As the captain had asked, he would do it without complaint, but honestly, he'd hardly interacted with the senior's parents at all, and it was a little weird that they insisted on including him.

Still, given that he and the captain were the only people there under 40, maybe it wasn't so surprising. Tezuka politely took in the various condolences with good grace, but when he'd given the freshman an opportunity to leave, his eyes had been begging him to stay. With a sigh, adjusting uncomfortable borrowed dress clothes that didn't fit him, Ryoma remained. The senior had given him a roof over his head, kept his secrets, provided a shoulder to cry on, and looked out for him time and time again. Maybe he wouldn't do as good a job, but he could at least provide silent support now. Even if doing so was painfully boring.

The funeral took up most of Sunday, but by Monday morning things seemed eerily normal once again. Breakfast was a somewhat sombre affair, but heading to school, Tezuka almost seemed like he was back to his usual self. Ryoma didn't mind either way - it was sort of reassuring to see the stoic senior actually showing some

emotions, even if only in private. Actually, it made the freshman feel pretty good to think that Tezuka trusted him enough to expose his own weaknesses like that. But seeing his senpai act normal assured him that he *had* helped, even if it was only just a little.

For once, Ryoma had been able to support his friend, instead of it being the other way around. Friend. They'd already been friends, probably for quite a while, but having it all official like that... It felt a little surreal to him. It kept him going through those miserable two nights spent shivering in the clubhouse after the captain had, for all intensive purposes, disappeared. But he'd known that there had to have been a good reason. Tezuka was a person of his word, after all. He'd called him by his first name in front of all the other seniors. It was a big deal, even if Tezuka brushed it off - Inui had already stipulated how rare it was. As rare as *never*.

Yes, he was inordinately pleased about that, though a little annoyed at how the captain continually wore himself down for his sake in the name of friendship. Hopefully he wouldn't do it anymore. Ryoma wasn't so proud as not to admit that his emotions had been a little raw lately, but he wasn't made of glass. Tezuka didn't need to coddle him so much. It was probably another bad habit picked up from the vice-captain.

They arrived at school early, but wound up sitting under the trees near the courts and talking about mundane matters to kill time, both having forgotten that morning practices were no longer occurring. It was irritating. As much as the extra sleep in the morning would be cherished, afternoon practice never felt like enough. Fortunately, Tezuka had already expressed a willingness to play extra tennis with him on Sundays and at least a couple of afternoons of the week. He'd take the senior up on it that afternoon. Tennis would cheer his senpai up. It always worked for him.

Ryoma nodded to himself as he broke away from the senior to head to his own class. Yeah. They should play as much tennis as they could before it became too cold to, anyway. It would be good distraction for Tezuka, and if in the meantime it helped him get

stronger so that he could completely thrash his old man and brother, then so much the better.

Afternoon practice that day featured random match ups - Coach Ryuuzaki had obviously decided to reward them for spending the past couple of weeks doing nothing but tedious drills. All of the Regulars naturally obliterated their opponents in record time - they were unlucky enough to miss any match ups with each other - and so scattered around the courts to watch the other matches play out. Naturally Ryoma quickly grew bored and wandered off to hang around Tezuka who was umpiring one of the matches. This prevented him from noticing the whispers and glances of his teammates two courts over.

"I mean... they can't even talk while Tezuka is umpiring."

"Fssshuu, maybe the brat is just waiting politely until the match is over to talk instead of interrupting."

"We are talking about the same Echizen, right?"

"He's just standing there," Kawamura reported, craning his neck to get a better look. "Why?"

"Prank?"

"On *Tezuka* ?"

"Hmm, right. I don't think even Echizen would dare."

"There's definitely something going on between those two," Fuji observed as he joined the circle of gossipers, making the set complete.

"Nya! That's what we were just saying! Ochibi's been acting strange for ages, but

Buchou keeps covering for him!" Kikumaru whispered conspiratorially.

"They've been travelling to and from school together," Oishi added. "It's weird; Echizen doesn't really live that close to Tezuka."

Momoshiro crossed his arms at that, failing to hide his irritation at being left as a second fiddle. None of the other regulars bothered to call him on it.

"There's the matter of first-names to consider, too," Fuji remarked.

"If they were in the same class, it would be no big deal, but the fact that this is Tezuka... it did strike me as a little unusual," Oishi confessed.

"Hoi, you don't think that they're... *you know*," Kikumaru asked in a hushed tone.

"Eiji!" The vice-captain exclaimed, scandalised by the suggestion.

"You were all thinking it!"

"Unlikely. The current probability is less than eight percent."

"They've been sharing lunch! Am I the only one who noticed?!" the acrobat exclaimed.

"Echizen's always stealing lunch from other people. Tezuka-buchou probably just lets him do it," Momoshiro pointed out.

"But what about everything else?!"

"Maybe they've been doing extra training together," Kaidoh pointed out pragmatically.

They all paused at that and considered the possibility. It *did* make sense, as Fuji never really played Tezuka seriously and thus Echizen was the only other person on the team that really pushed their captain to his limits. And it wasn't hard to believe that Echizen would go out of his way to accommodate extra practicing, even so far as getting up early in the morning to meet with the captain.

"While that is a reasonable explanation," Inui finally stated, breaking the contemplative silence, "It fails to accommodate a great number of other unusual patterns that I have been tracking. Echizen's erratic behaviour in classes, for one."

"He's been a little more... well, clingy, lately too," Momoshiro muttered, scratching his head.

"Eh? Ochibi? Clingy?"

"I can't picture Echizen being clingy with *anyone*," Kawamura protested.

"Well, clingy isn't quite the right word..."

The other regulars were deep in thought. Fuji stared at the ground, murmuring, "Now that you mention it, Echizen's been hanging around a lot more than usual. Even after ruling out how he's practically been attached to Tezuka lately, he used to wander off on his own a lot more. Especially at lunch and on weekends."

"True. I didn't think much of it at the time, but Echizen has even been willing to share other player's data with me lately - something he has never done before," Inui confirmed, searching through his notebook. "He's also had an approximately twenty second increase on his average time to start complaining when Kikumaru is choking him."

"I do not choke Ochibi!"

"Come to think of it, one of my neighbours' kids was saying something about someone named Echizen being the junior coach at their weekend class," Momoshiro piped up suddenly. "I'd completely forgotten to ask him about it, because it didn't seem like the sort of thing he'd do."

"Fsssshhhhhhh, I can't see the brat being terribly willing to coach a bunch of kids in his spare time," Kaidoh hissed.

"That lady has been dropping by after practice to visit Echizen fairly regularly," Kawamura noted thoughtfully.

"Ah! Ochibi has a girlfriend?! And she's an older woman?!" Kikumaru exclaimed in disbelief.

"Negative. That woman is Meino Nanako."

"Oh, so that makes her-?"

"Echizen's cousin. She lives with him and his parents. She attends classes at the nearby university."

"Remarkable as always, Inui," Oishi commented. "Although it makes me wonder why she would be dropping by after practice. You would think that Echizen would just see her when he gets home."

"Although it is sort of like Echizen is avoiding spending any time at home," Fuji mused.

That set the vice-captain worrying almost immediately. "Do you think he might have some family problems?"

Inui paused in his data scribbling and adjusted his glasses. "It's possible. It could be an explanation for why his cousin is coming to see him after practice. Sometimes if a situation is strained in the home, the neutral parties try to communicate outside of it."

"If that's the case, are you sure it's our place to intrude on Echizen's private business?"

Kawamura asked, looking concerned.

Inui seemed to be growing frustrated. "There are too many possibilities. I still do not have enough data."

"Saaa... then why don't we gather some?" Fuji suggested.

"You mean... follow him?" Kikumaru asked in an excited whisper. "Inui hasn't tried that already?"

"I tend to avoid tailing Echizen," he admitted after the team sent curious glances his way. "He has remarkably sharp hearing and eyesight. Then again..." His glasses glinted in the sunlight as he paused. "... Echizen has been quite distracted lately. His concentration on the court has been superb, but he's been caught not paying attention in classes other than just English multiple times of late. If we followed from a distance, even as a group it shouldn't be too hard."

"I don't like the idea of taking advantage of our team mate's upset state of mind like that," Oishi remarked disapprovingly.

"Relax, Oishi, this is for Echizen's own good," Fuji consoled the vice-captain with that ever-present smile on his face.

"But what about Tezuka? He's bound to still be upset about his grandfather..."

"It's not Tezuka we'll be following."

"We might as well be," Momoshiro complained. He was obviously still a little sore at the notion that he might have been usurped as the freshman's best friend.

"What they don't know won't hurt them," Kikumaru interjected enthusiastically, clearly warming to the idea.

"It would be best if we were to keep Horio and the others out of this, I think," Fuji advised as the freshmen trio started to head towards them. "If it turns out to be a sensitive issue..."

The others nodded their agreement. Even if they meant well, the trio were even worse at keeping secrets than their resident acrobat, and that was saying something. Not to mention that Horio had the sensitivity of the brick.

The three first-years stopped in their tracks, suddenly unsure of whether it was wise to continue when all of their senpai were suddenly wearing wide, obviously fake smiles and staring at them. "Maybe we should go watch Arai's match," Kachirou suggested feebly. The other two nodded their agreement and hurried away.

The Seigaku Regulars did always love a good mystery. If it involved spying on their team mates, so much the better.

Chapter 23

Author's Note: Only five chapters left! This chapter sort of ended at an awkward moment, sorry about that. Thanks for all the reviews so far, by the way. I haven't really had the chance to reply, but I have been reading them.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 23

Tezuka was surprised by how quickly his spirits had rebounded after his grandfather's death. He knew a lot of it had to do with Ryoma - offering silent support and distracting him with tennis whenever he could - but he'd always imagined that the period of grieving would be more protracted. His own father was still moping about the house, and would probably still be skipping work if his mother didn't bully him into going. It had been over a week now, and while all of them were frequently hit by pangs of sadness and loss at random reminders, those moments were no longer overwhelming.

It was unexpectedly relieving, sharing the burden like that. At first Tezuka felt bad about it - Ryoma had more than enough problems without him adding to them - but things seemed to work out. His mother frequently commented that he'd coped better than she'd expected, always with the underlying hint that it was thanks to their guest. With the way she sometimes talked, Tezuka was starting to think that she'd like to keep him permanently. "A little brother for our Kunimitsu," she remarked to him once in private. He'd almost choked at that. Still, he didn't mind it either. When the freshman had been originally invited to his house, it was intended as a stop-gag measure until they could figure out a more permanent solution. But now it was

sort of hard to remember what life had been like before Ryoma had been living with them. Had it only been a little over a month? It felt a lot longer.

Tezuka had long grown comfortable with the freshman shadowing him, but was now consciously valuing the persistent company. He was going to miss it after he graduated. There was something nice about going to school library after practice and having Ryoma lounge around while he studied, intermittently offering small samples of conversation. It created a sense of companionship that he'd never really experienced before.

The young Regular seemed unnaturally skittish that day, though. "Something bothering you?" he asked, not really expecting a reply.

"Inui's been following me lately," he complained in a low voice, even as his eyes darted around as though expecting the other senior to appear at any moment.

"Hm? He must be worried about you," Tezuka commented absently as he paged through his maths book.

Ryoma scowled. "More likely he's preparing for the next set of ranking matches."

"I doubt it - there's no more ranking matches until Spring, and it's unlikely that the two of you will wind up in the same set anyway. Inui would know that as well - he's probably casing out Kawamura and Kikumaru."

Echizen didn't bother replying, and Tezuka was grateful that the freshman didn't press for information on which people he would be up against. The seniors themselves would only have one more ranking match anyway; the last one before they graduated, which was really a purely symbolic measurement as they'd wind up handing the reins over to the juniors almost immediately afterwards. Either way, he expected that it was more likely that Ryoma didn't care - or he was still bothered by Inui's stalking. Tezuka could

sympathise with that. Sometimes he wished he were a little more ignorant of his surroundings so that he could better ignore the creepy pressure of Inui's calculating gaze. He was at least relatively certain that in this case his classmate meant well, as all of the regulars had developed something of a big-brother complex towards their team's youngest member.... though how they displayed it varied rather dramatically from person to person.

It was sort of amusing to see Ryoma getting paranoid, in any case. "Does having Inui nearby bother you so much?"

A scowl. "If he wants to know something, he should just come out and ask."

"Unfortunately, that isn't Inui's style."

Another scowl. Smiling lightly, Tezuka started to gather his books, done for the day. They headed out of the library together, taking their time walking to the bus. "What's he worried about, then?" Ryoma asked sulkily.

"You've hardly gone for burgers with Momoshiro lately. You haven't been talking to the other freshmen at all. You've also been practicing harder than usual, even though there are no more scheduled matches or tournaments. Rather atypical behaviour. Inui always gets worried when things don't match his data."

Frowning and folding his arms, Ryoma quietly contemplated that. Both of them knew, of course, why it was the first-year had been doing those things, but without that context the behaviour was strange. Tezuka himself had been concerned by it prior to his discovery. If anything, it was amazing that it had taken Inui this long to start the stalking process.

The senior paused, adjusting the straps on his tennis bag over his shoulder. Now was as good a time as any to broach the subject. "I expect it would help if you told the others."

That statement was unexpected enough to momentarily confuse the freshman, if the expression on his face and awkward silence was anything to go by. Echizen was the only person Tezuka knew who could communicate so proficiently without saying much at all - though perhaps that was the pot calling the kettle black. Sighing, he explained, "I'm the only person outside of your family who knows you've been thrown out, correct? It's been two months now, and you're still keeping it to yourself. I honestly don't know how you've even managed to last as long as you have keeping up the act. But people are going to find out eventually, just like I did."

"It was pure fluke that you found out," Ryoma grumbled.

Tezuka pinned him with his best captain glare. "And I'm glad I did, because you'd probably-" The senior cut himself off, not intending on finishing that sentence. It still worried him when he stopped and considered the 'what-ifs' and tried to imagine what might have happened if Ryoma had gone undiscovered. It was clear that the first year hadn't been getting nearly enough sleep or food and with the onset of winter the tennis clubhouse would have become nearly as uninhabitable as the park - as proven by the most recent two nights Ryoma had tried to spend there. Not to mention what might have become of the first-year's mental state - even though Ryoma refused to admit it, it *had* been wearing him down. Just because he was made of stern stuff didn't mean that he didn't have a breaking point. But Tezuka didn't think that his companion would like having that pointed out to him, so instead settled for taking a different route. "The point of the matter is, how much longer do you think you can fool everyone? You said it yourself - Inui's started following you around, which indicates he's at least noticed something off enough to worry. Momoshiro still doesn't know why you won't walk home with him anymore. What are you going to do when parent-teacher conferences come around, or you need a permission slip signed for something? Ryuuzaki-sensei at the very least is bound to find out."

"I can forge my father's signature easily, or get Nanako to sign stuff," Ryoma promptly replied.

Tezuka resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the youth's determination to not co-operate. "I'm sure you could manage for a while yet, but that doesn't mean you should. I'm not suggesting you tell the entire school, but you should at least let the regulars and Ryuuzaki-sensei know. I'm sure they'll keep your confidence."

"Che, Momo-senpai and Kikumaru-senpai couldn't keep a secret to save their lives."

"The others will keep them in line. As will I. And I'm sure Ryuuzaki-sensei can also be convinced not to report to the authorities."

"Isn't there some law that they *have* to report it if they know?" Echizen asked.

Tezuka shouldn't have been surprised - he knew by now that in the precious time Ryoma wasn't playing tennis or sleeping, he'd be reading. Apparently his position as his class's library monitor wasn't entirely just show. In fact, the first-year was already making impressive headway through his personal modest library of books. So it stood to reason that he'd probably read up on such things when his situation first presented itself. "I am uncertain of the specifics, but as I understand it that is only if they believe you are in harm's way."

Ryoma mulled over that for a few minutes - the captain could practically see the wheels turning in his head. The bus arrived, and they took a pair of seats towards the back.

"I would feel better if some others knew," Tezuka eventually said softly. "In case anything was to happen to me." Like it already had. His guilt would never be fully swept away. He hadn't believed himself capable of such a gross neglect of responsibility, even if it was entirely accidental.

"... I'll think about it," came the grudging reply. That was an improvement, at least. "... But I'm never telling my classmates."

Tezuka opened his mouth to argue, but then closed it again. That was probably fair enough. Kachirou and Katsuo wouldn't be able to keep a secret from Horio, and if Horio knew anything at all, secret or otherwise, it would be announced to the whole school in a matter of minutes. As captain he hadn't to deal very much with their freshmen members, but even he knew that.

The senior hadn't expected any action to come about from their conversation for a while yet, but it appeared that he only had to wait until Monday for things to start moving.

It was an ordinary enough day. They arrived at school, went to classes, ate lunch and attended afternoon practice all as normal. When Tezuka started closing up the clubhouse, Ryoma suggested, "Should we go to the street courts today?"

The senior contemplated that briefly, searching his mind for any assignments due or tests the next day. Was he caught up on his student council duties yet? His conscience came up clear after a moment, and he nodded his agreement.

The street courts were deserted for once; rather unusual for a weekday afternoon, but then, it was getting quite cool in the evenings and most people were starting to prefer indoor entertainment. They didn't play a proper match, instead just taking turns serving and having some casual rallies. This sort of practice was usually used to try and refine some new moves - Ryoma was in the process of attempting to copy over some of his more difficult trick shots to his right hand - but that day the freshman didn't seem interested in it.

When the sun started to dip into the horizon, Tezuka called an end to their playing - they both still had homework to do that evening, after all. However they hadn't gone more than a couple of blocks from the street courts when Ryoma suddenly stopped in his tracks. Curious, Tezuka halted too, looking questioningly at his companion.

Ryoma whirled. "You can stop hiding already! I know that you're following us!"

Tezuka had to school his face into as neutral an expression as possible when the rest of the regulars sheepishly rose from behind the bushes half a block behind them. He hadn't even noticed them. Then again, thanks to Inui he tended to background most stalkerish movements, over time coming to associate them entirely with the data gatherer. Still, that *all* of them managed to follow without capturing his attention...

"Mou, we were found out!" Kikumaru complained.

"I did tell you that there was an 80 chance that Echizen would notice. And with the ruckus Momoshiro and Kaidoh were making earlier, it's rather amazing we got as far as we did."

Echizen folded his arms, glaring at his senpai. Tezuka was internally amused at how his stare temporarily cowed at least half of their team. For a freshman, he certainly had guts. Then again, he had stood up against adult tennis pros - his senpai on the tennis team were nothing to afraid of. Except for maybe Fuji. And Inui when he was holding a pitcher of juice.

"Saa, when did you notice?" Fuji asked curiously.

"When we were leaving the clubhouse."

"The WHOLE TIME? You made us wait that long?! Ochibi is mean, nya!"

The glare transformed into a self-satisfied smirk. "Serves you right."

"But we were worried, Ochibi!" Kikumaru protested. "You've been acting strange for so long! And then you started walking home with Tezuka instead of Momo all the time!"

"Yes, Tezuka, what has been going on with you two? It's like you've been keeping something from us," Fuji said sweetly.

Tezuka paid his classmate no mind, instead watching Ryoma clench his fists out the corner of his eye. He was honestly expecting the freshman to bolt at any moment, and was trying to decide whether to force a confession or let him escape.

Kawamura had apparently picked up on this too - before Oishi, surprisingly enough. "Echizen, if it's too personal you don't have to tell us anything, but we're only asking because we're concerned."

"Yeah! I'm supposed to be your best friend! You can come to me about anything!" Momoshiro declared, grabbing the youth in a friendly headlock. At least now Tezuka didn't have to worry about Ryoma making a run for it.

"Only if you want, though," Oishi interjected hurriedly. "We don't want to pry... well, we do, but that is, we respect your privacy and it's just that there are a few things that don't make any sense and everyone's imaginations have sort of been running away and..."

"I'm living with Buchou at the moment," Ryoma suddenly announced, presumably to shut everyone up.

It worked. They were all temporarily stunned into silence, glancing between their captain and rookie.

"Ah, Ochibi and Buchou are-?" Kikumaru started.

"I was thrown out of my house."

Silence again. Eventually, Inui cleared his throat and stated, "I have to say, that was not within any of my scenarios."

Kaidoh was the next to speak. "You okay?" he asked gruffly, in the tone of voice meant to suggest that he didn't really care either way, even though most of them knew by now that he did.

"Like I said, Buchou's been taking good care of me."

Momoshiro and Kikumaru had been temporarily rendered speechless. Fuji opened his eyes and addressed Ryoma, though his gaze was focused on Tezuka. "How long?"

Ryoma was trying his hardest to remain nonchalant; trying to make it sound as if they were discussing the weather rather than revealing the secret he'd been keeping from his teammates for so long. "About two months."

None of them had been expecting that. Under different circumstances Tezuka might have enjoyed seeing Fuji get a shock, though his classmate hid it well enough.

Tezuka figured it was time for him to step in before Ryoma could once again gloss over the important parts and insist that everything was okay. "I found him in the clubhouse a month ago. He'd been sleeping there for three weeks - he stayed in a park before that."

"In a park?" Fuji asked in a dangerously smooth voice, eyes sharp as daggers.

"Echizen! Why didn't you tell us! You could have come over - we would have been more than happy to put you up for a while!" Momoshiro pleaded, finally finding his voice.

Ryoma tugged his cap down over his face, embarrassed. "I did stop by your house first Momo-senpai, but no one was home. By then I was too tired to walk anywhere else, so I slept in the park. After that, it didn't seem to matter anymore."

Momoshiro looked stricken at that news, and Tezuka was similarly surprised. Ryoma hadn't told him that he had initially reached out for help. It was hardly Momoshiro's fault that he wasn't at home, but the mere act of Echizen reaching out to *anyone* for help was rare enough that the junior must feel terrible that in that one instance he hadn't been there to give it.

Tezuka added that piece of information to his expanding puzzle of the freshman's plight. The picture was starting to make more sense over time, but every time he thought he was nearly finished he'd discover another piece that had been missed. From what he understood now, Ryoma had probably dragged himself to his friend's house, prepared to bite down on his pride in his extreme need. Already feeling pretty terrible, when he discovered it empty he probably couldn't summon the will to clamp down any further on his damaged pride and seek someone else's assistance. Over the course of the first night and day, in the effort to salvage what little dignity he had remaining he probably convinced himself to keep it secret and manage on his own. Pride was an even bigger issue for the young tennis star than what it was for Tezuka - he could understand that Ryoma had probably been hurt, confused and humiliated, to the point where preserving his remaining dignity became more important than his health and comfort.

By now, Tezuka had more or less figured out all the reasoning behind the first-year's recent actions, so this extra insight wasn't terribly earth-shattering. But it served as an uncomfortable reminder that neither of them yet fully understood the motivations of the rest of the Echizen family. Ryoma said that it was probably just all about tennis, but he didn't know for sure. It didn't fly as a valid reason to Tezuka. You didn't throw your children out of the house just because they lost a tennis match. Why even set up such a competition between your sons in the first place? There were lots of rivalries in families - the Fuji family was an excellent example of one almost torn apart by it - so why go that extra mile?

There had to be more to it than just tennis. There just *had* to be.

Ryoma had escaped to his side, sidling close to him as though for protection from the barrage of questions. Tezuka rubbed at his temples briefly, feeling a headache coming on. It was his suggestion that the freshman come clean with the others, so he shouldn't complain... but he still hadn't envisioned it happening quite like this.

Chapter 24

Author's Note: Cliffhangers within.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 24

The interrogation seemed to go on forever. It was clear to Tezuka that Ryoma was hoping he could let the matter settle with as few words as possible, but his teammates wanted details. He couldn't blame them - he'd practically wrung them out of the freshman over time as well, but couldn't they see how overwhelmed their kouhai was?

"Why exactly were you thrown out?" Inui asked, cutting straight to the most important points.

Ryoma tugged down his cap even further over his eyes, muttering, "Ryoga came home. We played a match. I lost."

"You lost?" Momoshiro seemed flabbergasted by that possibility.

Ryoma scowled. "It was after that practice where you and Kikumaru were misbehaving with Inui's juice," Tezuka offered.

Now the junior looked even guiltier, though that hadn't been his intention.

"You were thrown out for something like that?" Kawamura asked in disbelief.

Ryoma remained silent, which by now most of the regulars had come to interpret as a 'yes'.

"How horrible," Fuji intoned softly. "You must have been very lonely."

It never ceased to amaze Tezuka how easily his classmate managed to zero in on the heart of every matter.

"Che, I'm still here, aren't I? I obviously managed just fine," Ryoma replied dismissively.

"Isn't that illegal? Shouldn't family services or the police or someone be notified?" Oishi asked worriedly.

"They don't need to be."

"But Echizen..." Oishi started.

"It'll just create a fuss over nothing," Ryoma insisted, "I'm doing fine. And... if family services or someone were to be involved, I might not be able to keep going to Seigaku."

It seemed as though Momoshiro and Kikumarū were about to start crying at any moment. "Ochibi! You wanted to stay with us? That's so sweet!" Kikumarū wrestled the freshman into a hug.

"... can't... choking..."

"You're staying with Tezuka now, you say?" Inui inquired, notebook open and pen poised to write.

"Since he found me in the clubhouse after the gates had closed," Ryoma admitted, finally freeing himself from the hyperactive senior's grasp.

"And your cousin who keeps coming to the courts?"

Echizen looked embarrassed at that, mumbling, "She was away visiting her parents in the country for a few weeks. She only found

out after she came back."

"Your teaching of junior tennis classes at the private sports complex across town is also related?"

The first-year looked as though he wanted to melt into the ground at this point. "I needed money."

"Oooochibiiiiii!" Eiji wailed, actually tearing up at this point.

Ryoma was looking beseechingly to him for escape and Tezuka decided that it was time to end the conversation. "That's enough!" the captain barked. The rest of the team fell silent. "It's nearly dark. We were on our way home when you stopped us."

"But-" the acrobat started, still sniffing.

Tezuka pinned the hyperactive redhead with a sharp gaze. "Ryoma waited so long to tell you because he wanted to keep this quiet. I expect that you'll respect that, and won't push him for details he is unwilling to give nor spread word of this situation around."

"Of course we won't," Fuji interjected smoothly, eyes glittering in the twilight.

"But-" Momoshiro started to say.

"Let's go," Tezuka interrupted, ignoring the junior and making to leave.

"See you both tomorrow!" Kawamura called out, everyone else belatedly waving goodbye as they walked away. Ryoma nodded to his senpai, and then double-stepped to catch up with the captain's longer stride as they made their escape.

The rest of the Regulars stood there in silence until they were out of sight, the situation still sinking in. Eventually, Oishi asked, "Fuji, did you have any idea?" The vice-captain looked positively stricken that

he'd been unaware of the freshman's situation - never mind how distraught Momoshiro was.

The prodigy shook his head as he stared in the direction Tezuka and Echizen had vanished. "Of course not, Oishi. We all figured out that something wasn't right, but it's safe to say that none of us expected something like that."

"The signs were there," Inui commented, shutting his notebook with a snap. "But that scenario was not one that even occurred to us. In light of this revelation, I wish we had acted when the first signs of trouble appeared, rather than biding our time waiting for the situation to become clearer."

"Poor Ochibi," Kikumaru murmured, looking ready to start crying at a moment's notice.

"At least now we know why Echizen started eating lunch with us," Fuji mused.

"That must have been directly after Tezuka discovered his situation," Inui agreed. "He was obviously trying to make certain that Echizen ate. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to assume he was surviving by sharing boxed lunches with the other freshmen and getting free burgers from Momoshiro."

"Now I feel terrible for calling him a cheapskate all the time," complained the power player. "Argh! Why didn't he say anything?! He just sat there, suffering in silence! He must have been practically starving!"

"Echizen's pride keeps getting in the way of him asking for and accepting help when he really needs it, I guess," Oishi noted. "It's a good thing Tezuka stepped in."

"Buchou *has* been taking good care of Ochibi, hasn't he?" Kikumaru asked, starting to perk up.

"If we think about it, Echizen was looking his worst about a month ago - that means he started improving almost immediately after Tezuka discovered him," Kawamura observed thoughtfully. "He must have really been looking after him."

"We already know he was making sure that Echizen ate," agreed Fuji. "And I've seen them talking a lot too. He's probably done more than we know."

"It's good that we can rely on Tezuka-buchou like that," Momoshiro added, looking a little less distraught as he realised that at least the problem was in hand already.

"Fssshhhhhuuuuu, it's a lot of extra work for the captain, though, isn't it? Echizen won't like accepting that much charity," Kaidoh hissed.

Inui immediately picked up on the Viper's hidden suggestion. "That's true, Kaidoh - now that we are aware, we should be doing everything in our power to put them both at ease. If we all have a hand in looking out for Echizen, Tezuka will not have to worry so much."

The people in discussion were meanwhile walking home in an oppressive silence. When they were only a few blocks shy of their destination, Tezuka softly asked, "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Ryoma just made a non-committal grunt.

They arrived home, and Ayana greeted them warmly, though quickly retreated back into the living room, obviously noticing the serious pall over the two of them. Tezuka wondered how she seemed to know, especially when neither of them were being particularly expressive.

They both lied awake in bed that night, staring at the ceiling. "It'll be okay," he said into the darkness.

"Yeah."

More silence.

"Wanna play a match after practice tomorrow?"

They'd just played today, but he had the feeling that they'd both need it. "Sure. Just one set, though, no tiebreak."

Tezuka wondered if it was possible to *hear* a smile through the darkness.

Without morning practice, they managed to avoid the other regulars for a little longer than usual. Lunch was a bit awkward, with the more polite of the seniors getting tongue-tied, both Momoshiro and Kaidoh coming to join them, and half of the regulars offering Ryoma their lunch. The freshman just stared at them, and muttered, "I'm fine with Buchou's, thanks." Though he did end up accepting some of Momoshiro's anyway. Tezuka had the feeling it was just to make his friend feel better, but didn't dare point it out.

Fortunately Fuji held court impressively at the table, preventing them from talking too much about sensitive issues where others could easily eavesdrop. Afternoon practice was a different story. Everyone was playing matches again. Tezuka finished his against one of the non-regular seniors quickly enough, as did Oishi, but the rest of the regulars were still playing, having mostly wound up against each other. Apparently the vice-captain thought this a prime opportunity to talk.

"Tezuka."

"Oishi," he acknowledged.

"Echizen... is he okay? Really?"

Closing his eyes, Tezuka admitted, "He wasn't doing so well for a while, but now... I think he is for the most part. There are still some issues to deal with..." Ryoma was probably going to have to confront his father or brother eventually - for a tennis match in ten months, if nothing else. "... But he'll be able to handle them."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Well... you know; your grandfather died pretty recently. How have you been holding up with all that in addition to this? You haven't really... well, you know..."

"I did my grieving in private. Outside of that, I've honestly been too busy to focus on it. But perhaps that's best." Oishi had once been his closest confidant. He hoped the other man didn't feel as though his position had been stolen, but then, Seigaku's 'mother' was much too reasonable and kind-hearted to be jealous over something like that.

True to form, the vice-captain smiled. "Even though the circumstances are so terrible... maybe it has worked out for the best. I think both you and Echizen needed a friend."

He didn't acknowledge the statement. Tezuka considered his teammates his friends, and he knew that Ryoma did too, but that hadn't been what Oishi meant. It was definitely a different level of friendship - a sort of closeness and understanding that even time couldn't replicate. They watched as Fuji played Kawamura on the court in front of them. The prodigy could have easily ended the match earlier, but seemed intent on drawing it out. At least the power player looked like he was having fun, shouting English taunts for every third hit.

"Tezuka, why didn't you tell us?" Oishi asked quietly. Ah, there it was. The question had been hovering about unspoken ever since the previous afternoon.

"Because it wasn't my place to do so. All I could do was encourage Echizen to tell you himself."

Nodding, the vice-captain admitted, "I thought it might be something like that." Then... "If we hadn't been following you..."

"I think he would have told you eventually, but perhaps not this soon, and not in that fashion."

Oishi shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "Never expected that sort of thing would happen to one of us."

"Nobody did," Tezuka agreed. It looked like most of the matches would soon be wrapping up. "End practice for me. I have a few student council things to take care of." Normally he'd stay to the end of practice and tend to them after, but didn't want to make the freshman wait too long.

"No problem."

"Thank you. Tell Ryoma where I am."

He headed off in the direction of the school building. Meanwhile, Ryoma slammed another service ace past Kikumaru.

"Echizen, five games to one. Change court," Arai called in a bored tone.

"Mou, Ochibi!"

"Mada mada dane," he quipped at the acrobat as they swapped sides.

The last game took a while, but Ryoma had hit a good rhythm, breaking serve again and claiming the match. The next court over, Fuji and Kawamura finished their match, as did Momoshiro and Kaidoh on theirs. Oishi greeted them and handed out their water bottles as they left the courts and headed to the clubhouse to change. "Echizen, Tezuka said to tell you that he's taking care of some student council work."

Ryoma just nodded - he'd join the captain later. Momoshiro slung an arm over his shoulder, "Does that mean you're up for burgers

today?" His voice had a sort of forced casualness to it, like he was trying really hard to act natural.

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Argh, Echizen, I'm hurt! You don't hang out with us anymore!"

"Che, I'm sparing your wallet Momo-senpai. You should be happy," he remarked with a deadpan.

Momoshiro laughed, then turned serious. "I don't mind, you know, right? I'll pay. Especially with your situation, you know..."

Growing miffed, Ryoma shrugged the arm off. "I'm not a charity case." Then... "But you can pay for my burgers if you insist."

Kikumaru glomped him from behind almost as soon as he'd escaped the power player's grasp. "Ochibi is so brave, nya! I'll pay for your burgers too! And you can come sleep at my house any time you want!"

"Buchou's house is fine."

Oishi frowned. "That reminds me... Tezuka left in the middle of the day last week to go to Kyushu. Where did you stay while he was away?"

Ryoma shifted uncomfortably. Hadn't they interrogated him enough the day before already?

"Echizen?" Fuji prodded.

Wordlessly, he gestured at the clubhouse.

"Oh my, you went back?" the prodigy murmured. "It's been even colder lately too."

"It hit a minimum of eleven degrees Celsius the first night, and eight degrees the second," Inui reported promptly. "If you layer wind chill

on top of that..."

"OCHIBI! HOW DID YOU NOT FREEZE TO DEATH? YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO STAY IN THE CLUBHOUSE ANYMORE!" Kikumaru exclaimed, shaking the freshman repeatedly.

"What?" came the abrupt bark behind them.

The regulars froze as a unit, before they all very slowly turned around. Ryoma felt his heart plummet to his stomach.

"Ah, Sumire!" Fuji remarked in a forcefully cheery voice.

Their Coach stood behind them wearing her usual pink jumpsuit combination along with a dangerously neutral expression. "Would someone care to explain this to me?"

Inui adjusted his glasses, then cleared his throat. "... How much did you hear?"

The slightest hint of a scowl was developing. "Enough."

Everyone shuffled in place awkwardly, clearly unwilling to say anything, eyes sliding towards their youngest member with guilt. Ryoma was on the verge of a panic attack. His idiot senpai hadn't been able to keep his secret for even a full day?! His eyes darted about the courts, but it didn't look like any of the other club members had been in earshot, thankfully.

"Well?" Coach Ryuuzaki demanded impatiently.

No one uttered a word. Kikumaru had turned as white as a sheet, and Kaidoh was glaring at all of them indiscriminately. Inui tapped a pencil nervously against paper.

When it appeared no one was willing to budge, Ryuuzaki's eyes zeroed in on him like a hawk's would on its prey. Ryoma forced himself to stand his ground, but wound up feeling a little relieved when Momoshiro and Kawamura casually shifted in front of him. Her

gaze grew calculating at that, before she abruptly ordered, "Echizen. Come with me."

His feet had turned to rock, and his throat felt like it was closing up. Why was it so hard to breathe? Fuji stepped forward, "Maa, Sumire, I think you've-"

"I've told you not to call me that, Fuji," Ryuuzaki interrupted sternly, crossing her arms and starting to walk away. She glanced back when nobody moved. "What are you just standing there for?"

Automatically, Ryoma lurched forward. Oishi hurried alongside him. "Come on, Echizen."

"Just Echizen, thank you Oishi. You have to call practice to a close," Ryuuzaki firmly informed him.

The vice-captain had no choice but to fall behind as their Coach led him away, heading to what the freshman assumed was her office. With leaden feet, Ryoma trailed her, just far enough behind that she wouldn't try to talk to him, but close enough that she'd know he was still following. Should he make a run for it? What could he do? Just refuse to answer?

It was all going to fall apart. No matter how much or how little Ryuuzaki had heard, now that she was suspicious there was no way they'd be able to keep the truth from her. And when she found out, she'd *have* to report it. The law bound her to. And then the press would become involved, family services would become involved; everyone would know and they'd send him away for sure. Away from Seigaku. Away from Tezuka.

They'd arrived at her office without him even noticing. "Echizen, take a seat," she offered, her voice a little softer now. Blankly, he complied, staring at his knees. She was going to want to know everything. Was he even capable of telling her? It was hard enough just telling his senpai the day before. He'd known it was a mistake. Even if his teammates tried their very hardest not to tell anyone else,

the risk of having someone overhear had always been too high. Accidents happened, after all.

Tezuka had thought it would be fine, though. Since when was Tezuka ever wrong?

His hands clenched the fabric of his pants so hard that his knuckles turned white. But Tezuka had been wrong. Where was he, anyway? Right, student council. He had to think. According to his friends, he was an absolutely horrid liar, but he'd also managed to fool most of them for the better part of two months, so what did they know? Think of it like tennis. A solid defence. Each of her questions needed a return. She'd try to wear down his endurance, but he'd outlast her until she was forced to concede defeat.

He wasn't going to leave Seigaku. He wasn't going to leave Tezuka. He just *couldn't*. He'd figure out a way.

Chapter 25

Author's Note: This chapter was a rather difficult one to write. I wasn't entirely happy with Ryuuzaki-sensei, but hopefully it came out okay. In regards to the law stuff, please don't nitpick it. My knowledge on the subject matter is a couple of years out of date, and it differs from country to country.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 25

Tezuka fished through the poorly stacked folders, looking for where the treasurer had hidden the budgets. He was briefly distracted from this quest by the pattering sound of running footsteps in the hallway, and then when the door violently burst open, pulled from it completely.

"Tezuka!"

It was Fuji. The normally serene prodigy wore an almost panicked expression. He was out of breath and his hair was mussed - he'd obviously sprinted there all the way from the courts.

"Fuji. What's the matter?"

A second later, Oishi, similarly ruffled, caught up. "It's Echizen," he gasped. The captain stood at attention, nerves suddenly on end. "Ryuuzaki-sensei... Tezuka, I'm so sorry! We were just talking, and didn't realise..."

"Where is he?" he demanded.

"She took him to her office," Fuji reported, standing aside to clear the doorway. Tezuka took off at a run.

Ryuuzaki had found out. It had been a niggling concern at the back of his head that their coach might eventually stumble across Ryoma's situation - she was a rather sly woman who kept surprisingly close tabs on her team. But Tezuka had not honestly thought she would find out so soon.

He skidded around the corner, spying the closed office door up ahead. Completely forgetting his usual propriety, he threw the door open with a sharp bang.

The two occupants of the room turned towards him, startled. Ryoma's face broke into an expression of abject relief - Ryuuzaki just raised an eyebrow as he tried to catch his breath. "Tezuka. Just the person I wanted to see. Please, take a seat."

Tezuka closed the door behind him and took the seat next to Ryoma stiffly. This wasn't a conversation he was looking forward to having. Barging in like that probably hadn't helped their situation any, either.

"This one," she began, indicating Ryoma, "is refusing to explain some rather curious things I overheard this afternoon. Something about staying with you, and sleeping in the clubhouse?" She seemed undecided whether to take the stern or gentle approach to this newly discovered issue, and was currently managing to tread the fine line between the two.

Tezuka watched Ryoma out of the corner of his eyes. His fists were clenched and trembling. He must have decided that remaining vague when asked and silent when pressed was the safest route.

It wouldn't work, though. As stubborn as Ryoma was, Ryuuzaki could be so more. If he kept it up, she might get the bright idea to call the freshman's parents, and there was no way that could possibly end well.

"Ryoma," he said softly, "I think we should tell her."

Ryuuzaki was sitting at attention - she'd obviously already deduced that something big was going on. Ryoma sent him a quick, disbelieving glance, but soon relented with a resigned nod. What else could they do?

He was aware of fingers hesitantly grabbing at his hand, as though looking for some assurance. Quietly, Tezuka slid Ryoma's right hand into his left, interlacing their fingers together and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

Taking a deep breath, the freshman started talking. "I was thrown out of home because I lost a tennis match with my brother. I've been staying with Buchou. But when he was called away to Kyushu, I couldn't get in to the house, so I slept in the clubhouse instead." The word tumbled out in something of a breathless rush.

They were greeted with stunned silence. Apparently they had shocked the elderly woman speechless. She shook herself, then asked, "I'm sorry, but could you repeat that?"

"I was thrown out of home."

She gathered her composure quickly. "When? How long has this been going on without my knowledge?" A bit of a hard edge was present in the woman's voice, coloured with faint disbelief.

Ryoma's mouth was pressed into a thin line, so Tezuka braced himself and answered instead. "I found him sleeping in the tennis clubhouse a little over a month ago. He'd already been there for a month." He decided to omit the information about the park for the time being. Ryuuzaki Sumire had something of a temper, after all, and he didn't see the point in the fanning the flames of the fire more than necessary.

"TWO MONTHS? THE KID'S BEEN HOMELESS FOR TWO MONTHS AND NOBODY TOLD ME?!" Ah, there it was.

"There was no need," Ryoma mumbled.

"The other regulars only found out yesterday," Tezuka added, in hopes of mollifying her a bit.

Ryuuzaki was pacing behind her desk now, visibly restraining her anger. The captain really didn't want to be there, but it was better that their coach direct some of her ire towards him instead of Ryoma, whom he suspected wouldn't be able to handle it so elegantly right now. It helped that he knew she meant well, and that her anger was not truly directed at them, but the freshman probably wasn't be able to tell the difference.

"I don't believe this... thrown out? That Nanjiroh..." She glared at them. "You're not pulling my leg, are you?"

At their blank expressions, she scowled. "Right, forgot who I was talking to. But still! Living on the streets?!" she raved. Her eyes swivelled towards the phone, and she stalked towards it with a determined air. "I've got to talk to that idiot, and sort this-"

"Don't!" Ryoma blurted. Her hand halted above the receiver. "I don't... I don't want to see him," he finished lamely.

Ryuuzaki stood there for a long moment, clearly battling with an intense desire to call her old student and have a good rant at him. Eventually, her anger cooled back down to a simmer and she stepped away from the phone. She stared at Ryoma for a long moment, before finally murmuring, "He really did it, didn't he?"

"We would not lie to you about something like this," Tezuka replied quietly.

With a tired sigh the woman shuffled back to her chair, suddenly showing her age. "Sorry, sorry... it's just all quite difficult to take in, you understand."

"We understand," Tezuka agreed.

"This at least explains why the other teachers were asking about you not paying attention in class," she grounded out. "So, now you're staying...?"

"He's staying at my house," the senior confirmed.

"Hmph, I'm disappointed that you didn't tell me sooner, Tezuka. That's a rather gross neglect of your duties as captain." Ryoma sent him a worried glance. He rubbed his thumb across the back of freshman's hand.

"I understand. However, given the personal nature of the issue, I felt that I should not do so without Ryoma's permission. There were many other factors involved as well. I will take full responsibility and accept any punishment for my actions."

"There'll be none of that," Ryuuzaki grumbled, waving her hand dismissively. "The one who should really be punished is that idiot Nanjiroh. I knew he could be an irresponsible bastard, but I didn't think he'd ever do something like this! It was too much to hope that Rinko sorted him out after all." Sighing, she rubbed her hands against her temples. "Okay, give me a minute to absorb this. I need to think."

They waited patiently while she sat there in thoughtful silence for several minutes. Finally, she asked, "Do you know why?"

That wasn't a question Tezuka could answer. He turned his head to face his companion. Ryoma glanced away, before eventually murmuring, "For tennis, I guess."

"For tennis?"

The first-year shrugged. "It must be tennis. He never really explained why. But tennis is the only reason I can think of."

Ryuuzaki seemed dubious. "But would even a tennis-obsessed idiot like Nanjiroh go that far?"

Ryoma was looking distinctly uncomfortable by now. "Probably." The admission sounded somewhat bitter.

She sat back, and contemplated that for a moment. "Hrm... You know, this is really something I'm obligated to report to family services."

Tezuka hesitated, then ventured, "We are aware. But both Echizen and I were hoping that because he is in no current danger that you would not be required to do so."

"It's embarrassing - I understand that. And Nanjiroh's still celebrity enough that it could make it into the papers."

"And I don't want to leave Seigaku," Ryoma added quietly.

Ryuuzaki gave him a sympathetic look. "Right, Seigaku. Even so, if it comes to light anyway and it's revealed that I knew about it, that's my job on the line. You kids understand that, right?"

The grip on his hand tightened to the point that the senior started to become preoccupied with the flow of blood to his fingers.

Forcing himself to remain calm, Tezuka mentally ran through every loophole he could think of it, every plea that might make their Coach change her mind. As much as it shamed him to admit it, it was as much for himself that Ryoma had to stay as it was the freshman's own wishes. He squeezed Ryoma's hand back, wishing there was some more depth to the assurance.

Had they really reached the end of the line? Were the past two months of hardships going to be for naught?

"I ran away!" Ryoma blurted suddenly.

Both Tezuka and Ryuuzaki looked at the freshman in surprise.

"What?" Ryuuzaki asked, looking confused. The captain very nearly smiled at the sudden realisation. Of course!

"None of that was true. I just ran away from home, because we had a fight. Buchou's family are letting me stay with them."

"Echizen..." she began.

Tezuka cleared his throat. "Ah, sensei... I should point out that if family services become involved, they're effectively powerless to take any action in the case of runaways."

She frowned. "I believe the police have the ability to return the child home after a certain number of days, especially one Echizen's age."

"That is true. But only if the family requests it."

The woman's eyes widened. She grinned ruefully at them. "You're a smart pair of little rascals."

The death grip on his hand relaxed a little. Tezuka smiled faintly. It was okay. They'd found a way. "Neither Echizen nor myself wanted to put you in an awkward position."

She smiled at that. "You kids... Very well, then, I'll keep it to myself. I'll even help out where I can." The senior could practically feel Ryoma's relief.

"Then can we go?" he asked eagerly.

With a heavy sigh, she agreed, "Yes, you can go for now. I'll be calling you back to here to ask more questions later, though."

The freshman practically shot to his feet, heading towards the door and half dragging the still-attached captain with him. "Although, Tezuka, if you could stay a minute," she requested.

Ryoma sent him an apprehensive glance, but the senior just waved him along. "I'll meet you by the gates."

Mollified, he retreated, though not before sketching a hasty bow to their Coach and sending one last concerned look to his senpai. They

waited until he was safely out of sight and earshot before speaking again.

"So, Tezuka..."

"He didn't wish anyone to know. I'm sure that if he had his way, that would still be the case. It was pure luck that I even caught him out," he explained.

She nodded. "Don't worry, I figured it was something like that. You say he's staying with you now, right? How's that working out? And what are his long-term plans?"

"I don't think he has any, to be honest. He's been practicing a lot more tennis to beat his father and brother, but I don't think he really wants to go back there. It has been bothering him lately, too. Neither my parents nor I have any problems with him staying with us indefinitely, but he's having a rather hard time believing that."

"Hmm, it would be difficult to swallow. He's probably feeling like a guest who has long overstayed his welcome."

Tezuka didn't respond. He didn't have any ideas of ways to remedy that.

She kept him there a little longer, asking a few more questions and giving some advice. Eventually she dismissed him, stating that they'd already given her far too much to think on for one day. He bowed respectfully and quickly left the room, finally allowing himself a relieved sigh.

That could have been a disaster in the making, but it had actually gone rather well. The senior even found himself feeling a little relieved at the thought that there was an adult who knew about the whole affair now.

When he left the school building, he could see Ryoma loitering by the gates. The other regulars were standing there talking to him, but

when they saw him they waved and headed off - or rather, Fuji corralled them away. He made a mental note to later berate his teammates for spilling the secret not even a day after finding out, and then to thank them for alerting him of the fact so quickly.

The two of them played tennis at the courts by Haruno station for hours, working all of the stress out of their systems. The stars were twinkling in the night sky by the time they finished. His parents rolled their eyes good-naturedly when Tezuka apologised and explained why they were home late.

"And here I was sort of hoping that Echizen would be a bad influence on him, but they spend the evening out playing tennis," Kuniharu groused.

"We were having a late dinner anyway," Ayana said with a smile. "Why don't you two go clean up, and we'll start when you get back downstairs."

They headed up to the bedroom, discarding their bags and getting changed.

"Ne, Buchou, we should play that much tennis every day."

"I have homework. So do you," he pointed out, shrugging his shirt over his head.

"But we don't have much longer left for tennis this year. Homework will still be there when the snow falls."

It was a compelling argument. "I don't know what my parents are talking about. You *are* a bad influence on me."

Ryoma just grinned.

Chapter 26

Author's Note: Only two chapters left! Homestretch.

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 26

The next week was incomparably different to the weeks previous.

After their initial slip-up - which had them all running laps and feeling guilty for days - it had amazed Tezuka how his regulars had come together. As a team, they were always close, united by their dream to win the Nationals and then further by their memories of that experience. A sulky Arai had more than once claimed that trying to get into the current batch of regulars felt like you were trying to intrude on a family, and now more than ever that felt like the truth. Tezuka always tried to look out for the club as a whole, but even he had to admit that he had grown attached to his teammates, and would have been disappointed had any of them fallen in the ranking matches to another club member.

They really had become something of a family, though, united by Echizen's cause. Oishi hovered over the freshman at the first sign of any snuffle or ill health, and was forever offering to talk to him. Inui had taken it upon himself to assist in optimising Ryoma's strained financial situation and tried to find him extra part-time work at tennis clubs, going so far as to rearrange his training schedule so that the freshman could fit all of his extra responsibilities in. Kawamura was constantly inviting them over for free sushi. Kikumaru smothered his kouhai with outlandish amounts of hugs and affection, and Momoshiro had gone into full big-brother mode, treating him to

burgers, dragging him to the street courts or arcade in the afternoons when he wasn't playing tennis with Tezuka and threatening anybody who so much looked at his friend wrong.

Even Fuji and Kaidoh did their part, with the Viper seeing fit to scare off inquisitive classmates and team members whenever Nanako came to visit and Fuji stepping in to accompany Ryoma anywhere if the other members of the team happened to be busy, even though the freshman never asked. Generally, if the blue-eyed prodigy decided to do something, you didn't question it for fear of the answer. Ryuuzaki-sensei's support had turned out to be an unexpected boon as well, as she ran interference with the other teachers and club members and just generally played the role of the responsible adult. On days when practice was running late, she brought Nanako into her office for coffee, and held both captain and freshman back for chats after practice, making sure that everything was going well and discussing Ryoma's options with him. A couple of times she'd suggested he pick up a scholarship to a boarding school - with his marks and tennis it would have been frightfully easy - and even put forward the idea of the youth turning pro, as getting through the US Open preliminaries proved that he had what it took. She only smiled knowingly when the freshman continued to insist on staying at Seigaku.

"They fret even worse than you, Buchou," Ryoma commented after that particular meeting. "You'd think I was an invalid or something."

Tezuka's lips quirked, but he didn't otherwise react. Even though Ryoma never took Oishi's invitations to talk, scoffed at Inui's schedule, tried to escape from Kikumaru's smothering and complained about Momoshiro picking fights on his behalf, the captain knew that their efforts were appreciated and that the first-year felt better for it.

He supposed he too should have felt relieved that Ryoma had the rest of the team to rely on now, but strangely, he felt a little jealous. It was irrational of him, but apparently he'd eventually come to like the fact that Ryoma relied so heavily on him. It should have felt like a

burden, but instead it was heart-warming. There was something truly precious about having the reserved youth's trust. It was like having a feral cat for a pet that would scratch anyone else that tried to pet it, though he suspected his kouhai wouldn't particularly appreciate being likened to a feral cat.

It was more proof that their relationship had rather dramatically changed. That was almost inevitable, but Tezuka couldn't quite figure out what it was changing into. Actually, that wasn't the real issue - it was more the sensation lingering at the back of his consciousness suspecting that in time, it was going to change again, in a direction he'd not properly considered. For now, though, he avoided examining his own emotions too deeply, and instead accepted the fact that he'd grown fond of Ryoma, and closer to him than any of his other friends. The fact that the freshman still seemed to prefer shadowing him to joining the others even now went some way to soothing that irrational jealousy, too.

It was hard to hide how pleased he was to see Ryoma waiting for him while he closed up the clubhouse on Friday. "Ryoma. You're not going with Momoshiro today?"

"Nah, he's baby-sitting his sisters again."

"Tennis?" Tezuka guessed.

Ryoma shook his head. "I was hoping we could go to the sports store. Nanako gave me some more money when she came by the other day, and I need to get some more grip tape for my racket, as well as some to replace what I've been borrowing from you."

Tezuka frowned. "Ah, that reminds me. I have to pick up a new wristband."

The freshman grinned, and started leading the way. Tezuka didn't need to know that Fuji and Kikumaru had invited him to go out for burgers with them in Momoshiro's stead. The senior had apparently developed some sort of complex where he was worried about

hogging his company or something. Ryoma thought it was stupid. He liked his senpai well enough, but he liked Tezuka best. Besides, even though they'd all been really good to him, Momoshiro and Oishi in particular seemed to tread as though on eggshells around him. It could get a little irritating after a while.

He didn't wander through the store browsing as he usually did when going with Momoshiro - there was no real point to it now. He didn't have the funds to even dream of purchasing a lot of the equipment he normally eyed - it was down to bare essentials now. He'd even considered compromising on the brand of grip tape he bought a couple of times, but couldn't bring himself to do so. A cheap grip would just wear down faster and wind up being more expensive anyway with the amount he used his racket.

Tezuka selected a new wristband - Ryoma made a mental note of the brand out of habit, then internally winced at how Inui-like that sort of observation was - they paid for their purchases, and then left the store. "Thanks for coming, Buchou."

The senior just inclined his head. Ryoma frowned. Something was missing. "Where's your bag?"

Tezuka looked at his hands, then looked back to the store. "Oh. I'll be back in a moment."

Ryoma chuckled to himself, sticking his hands in his pockets while he waited for the captain to retrieve his forgotten purchase. Would Inui consider something as inane as Tezuka forgetting his purchase to be worthwhile data? Not that he'd ever give Tezuka's information to the data-gatherer. If the senior asked nicely, he might share some things he'd noticed about the juniors, but never the captain.

He was so wrapped up in that train of thought that he almost missed the strangely familiar yet utterly alien voice calling to him.

"Oi... Chibisuke?"

Ryoma froze.

Very slowly, he started to turn around.

Green-black hair. Laughing hazel eyes, just a little darker than his own. A relaxed posture and sloping half-smile. A face eerily similar to his own.

"Ryoga?"

"Ha, it is you! Almost didn't recognise you without your cap!"

He hadn't expected to run into Ryoga, but then when he stopped to think about it, it wasn't so surprising. They all lived in the same area after all, and they both played tennis - if anything it was remarkable they hadn't come across each other sooner. But by the look on his face, it appeared his brother was surprised too.

"Didn't expect to see you here, chibisuke." He made as though to reach forward and ruffle the freshman's hair, but stopped halfway. Ryoma suddenly became aware of Tezuka's presence at his shoulder. That explained that. The captain always did have remarkable timing, be it good or bad. "Tezuka, wasn't it? Remember me? Ryoma's elder brother?"

"Of course," came the crisp reply.

If Ryoga was put off by the clear unfriendliness the senior was radiating, he gave no sign of it. Instead returning his attention to his sibling, he asked, "So, how have you been? Hope you've been practicing lots! Where are you staying at the moment, anyhow?"

"He's staying with me," Tezuka interjected before Ryoma even had the chance to open his mouth. Sighing and pulling his cap on, the freshman decided to let his senpai handle the exchange. Even if he didn't blame his brother, that didn't mean he was happy to see him - he'd spent quite a few miserable days and nights that were not quite

so easy to forget because of him, however much it may not have been entirely his fault.

"Eh, you're staying with *this* stiff board, Ryoma? Jeez! That can't be much fun."

"Buchou has been really generous. I owe him a lot."

Ryoga shrugged, and looked as though he was going to leave it at that, but Tezuka wasn't finished. "I found him sleeping in the tennis clubhouse. Apparently he was sleeping in a-

"Buchou!" Ryoma tried to interrupt, face reddening.

"-park before that." Tezuka finished. He sent his kouhai an apologetic glance, but didn't regret saying it. Even if Ryoma was embarrassed, his brother ought to understand what he was responsible for.

Indeed, that did stop the elder Echizen cold. "The park?" Eyes wide, he looked down at his sibling, who was pointedly looking away. "Is that true? Chibisuke? You were sleeping in a *park* ?!"

Ryoma hunched in on himself, obviously none too keen on having his misfortunes and discomfort so openly discussed once again.

Ryoga took a step backwards, shaking his head. "You're kidding... and then your school? In this weather?!" He shifted from foot to foot, fists clenching and unclenching anxiously. He stepped forward again, half-reaching out to Ryoma, though not quite going the whole distance. "I thought you had friends you'd stay with! That tall guy - Momoshiro - or that hyper one who played crazy acrobatic doubles!" He turned back to Tezuka, still shaking his head. "No way. I never.... Godammit, Ryoma! I never thought your pride mattered so much you'd be sleeping on the streets!"

"Shut up!" Ryoma suddenly snapped. "I don't have much pride left, okay?! But it was all I had, and I'll be *damned* if I let you stomp over what little there is left of it!"

Both Tezuka and Ryoga flinched back at that, surprised by the outburst from the normally quiet youth. "... I-" Sighing, Ryoma withdrew, seeming to deflate. "... Just forget it. Buchou's been kind enough to let me stay for a while, and I've managed to get a part-time job for money," Ryoma muttered, tugging his cap down over his eyes.

It was clearly meant to end the uncomfortable discussion, but Ryoga only seemed to grow paler. "Part-time job?" he echoed. "Oi, chibisuke, the old man didn't give you a bank account?"

Ryoma, in the process of turning away once again, halted and looked back towards his older brother. "What?"

"Don't you have a bank account? The old man should be depositing money into it every two weeks. How the heck did you think I survived? My friends might've been happy to let me live with them, but they would have kicked me out eventually if I couldn't contribute room and board!"

"He gave you money?" Tezuka repeated.

"Of course! It's crazy to think that he wouldn't! I'm not saying it wasn't tough," Ryoga's face twisted as though he was remembering eating something particularly bad. "... I mean, even with the money it's not... but he should have given some to you!" he hurriedly blurted, clearly seeking to skip past his own discomfort.

Ryoma stared. "This is first I've heard of it."

Tezuka's opinion of the other Echizen was improving only slightly when he seemed troubled by this revelation. "Chibisuke... are you saying the old man didn't ever explain *any* of this to you?"

The senior steeled himself as he felt the freshman tense up next to him, expecting another outburst. Surprisingly, though, Ryoma's voice was steady and quiet when he spoke. "Explain? No. All I knew was

that I lost a match and was suddenly out on the street. It took me a couple of days to piece everything together."

Ryoga actually took a few physical steps backwards at that. "But-but... you never got any explanation or anything? Not even when we were kids?"

"Didn't I just say that?"

"But when I... damn, I had no idea that old man was *that* much of a bastard! Gods, Ryoma, if I had known... I'm so sorry." He looked distraught.

"I keep telling you, stop being sorry. You had to deal with the exact same thing." Ryoma folded his arms, looking away.

"That's just it... I didn't. He'd already sat me down and explained the consequences of our matches first, and after I lost, he helped me pack, set me up with the bank account, and even drove me to my friend's house and talked to their parents!"

"And their parents didn't have anything to say about your father abandoning one of his sons with them?" Tezuka asked dryly.

Ryoga waved his hand dismissively. "He spun them some crazy story, and they didn't question it either, because he was calling every couple of weeks to check up on me and everything." He paused, forcing a strained smile onto his face. There had always been something a little odd about the elder sibling's smile, Tezuka realised. It was easy-going and carefree, but only half the time did it reach his eyes. "One of my friend's parents were a bit suspicious about it all, I think... a couple of teachers at school asked questions and..." he trailed off again. "... That's all irrelevant. After the second match, I decided to run off on my own. But even then I still received fortnightly payments, right up until I turned sixteen."

He ran a hand through his hair, glancing at his little brother nervously, as though afraid to meet his eyes. He looked genuinely

upset. Tezuka supposed that out of anyone, Ryoga probably had the best idea of what Ryoma had gone through. "I figured Ryoma would get the same treatment."

Tezuka noted with concern that his friend's fists were clenched so tight that the knuckles were turning white. "Ryoma?"

"He didn't. He didn't do any of that. I didn't get any explanation. No bank account, no phone calls... nothing. He just pushed me out of the door, telling me to come back in a year."

For a moment, Tezuka thought that Ryoma might actually start crying, but then, he didn't think that the youth would ever lose enough of his self-control to cry in public no matter how he felt. Instead, he was surprised to see a cold fire burn in his eyes. Ryoma turned abruptly, and started walking away, leaving Tezuka to catch up. He cast a brief glance behind them. Ryoga remained standing there awkwardly, a myriad of emotions flitting across his face.

Tezuka followed Ryoma in silence for some time, not wanting to break the fragile equilibrium until the freshman was ready. At first, the youth seemed to just be walking without destination, but eventually they came to a stop in a deserted park the captain had never come across before. He wondered briefly if this was where Ryoma had spent his first few nights before moving into the tennis clubhouse.

"It must have always been Ryoga, all along," he said suddenly, startling the captain.

"Pardon?"

"It's stupid, but for a while I was thinking he'd only brought Ryoga into it in order to make me into a better player - to give me a rival so that I'd improve faster and he could finally have an opponent worth his time. But it was never me at all. It was always Ryoga. I was just being raised as a *tool* to make Ryoga stronger. And now I've outlived my usefulness. So I've been thrown away."

Tezuka frowned. That didn't sound right. "But I've seen your brother play. You are a far better player than Ryoga. I imagine the only reason he won that match was because you were both surprised and exhausted. Even a professional would struggle under such conditions."

"I might be better than him right now, but after a year of him playing the old man? He got that good without anyone really training him."

"You don't know that," Tezuka pointed out practically. "Besides, I've seen *both* of you play. Every time you come across a difficult opponent, you evolve. I saw no such evolution in Ryoga's play style. He is an excellent player, but I don't believe he could defeat myself, Fuji or you in a fair match."

"Then *WHY* ?" he half-shouted, voice cracking. "Why else would he throw me out into the cold with no explanation when he practically held Ryoga's hand through it?! Why did he call Ryoga every week to check up on him, when the only person who bothered to check if I was even alive in the past two months was my cousin?!"

"I don't know," was the only answer Tezuka could give. He didn't think he could bring himself to say anything else.

The silence that followed was lengthy and oppressive - they couldn't even hear the twitter of birds or rustle of leaves that should have been present in a park. It was almost as though nature itself had stilled out of reverence for the freshman's anguish.

When Ryoma spoke next, his voice had turned to a cold steel, normally reserved for only his most arrogant opponents on the court. "Buchou - I'm going to become the strongest tennis player there is. I'm going to become far stronger than that old man. But I'm not going to play him. Even if I win every grand slam title there is, I'm never going to play him again. Even if he challenges me. If he enters a tournament to play me, I'll forfeit before I even get on the court. Beating him... or even crushing him with tennis isn't enough

anymore. That's what he's wanted all along. I'm going to deny him that pleasure."

The speech left Tezuka chilled to the bone. And yet, he couldn't help but find himself agreeing that for Echizen Nanjiroh, there would be no more fitting punishment. To see what he had thrown away... a *lifetime's* worth of work of which one was unable to reap the reward would be a torturous thing to deal with.

Perhaps that was what prompted the next words from the senior's mouth. "I'll come with you."

Startled, Ryoma turned his golden-brown gaze towards him. Tezuka shrugged slightly. "You're still going to need a rival. And what could possibly be a worse punishment than witnessing a strong player who refuses to play him? What about *two* strong players?"

The wicked smirk that stretched across Ryoma's face was the best thing he'd seen all day. "Che, didn't think you had it in you, Buchou."

"I may have mentioned it before, but I think you're a bad influence on me."

Chapter 27

Author's Note: Second last chapter, yay!

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 27

Ryoma had perhaps somehow been expecting for something to change after seeing his brother, but the day after his grand declaration wasn't that dissimilar from the ones previous - initially, anyway.

The only thing that was really different was that his motivation to train and improve had shifted focus again. It was no less intense, but his head felt... clearer, somehow. He'd arrived at an uncomfortable truth about his father; one that he didn't want to acknowledge, but that made his path clear before him all the same.

There would be people who disagreed, who would say that healing and forgiveness and understanding were the way. But Ryoma wasn't a forgiving person, and honestly believed that his father was probably past help. He considered trying to explain it to Tezuka, but didn't think that the senior would really understand, even though he knew his friend would try. Ryoga might get it, but he'd probably be the only other person on the planet who would.

Ryoma felt a little conflicted over his older brother, though. It wasn't like he was at all close to Ryoga - it was rather hard to be when they'd gone years without seeing each other - but there was a sense of kinship there. When he realised what Ryoga had sacrificed for him in the past... it was hard not to respect and admire and feel some

sort of loyalty towards him. In the same breath, however, his brother was indirectly responsible for his current predicament.

Frowning, Ryoma shook his head irritably and returned his attention to serving. The ball bounced frustratingly low, turning his recently un-returnable twist serve into something that Kaidoh handled rather easily.

The junior glared at him, but he just shrugged, finishing the rally and thus match with a drop shot. He could only compensate for the effect the cold had on the ball's bounce so much. There was a reason why tennis was a summer sport, after all.

"It was a good match," Fuji remarked from the sidelines as they left the court. Kaidoh hissed something unintelligible in their direction before stalking away. Ryoma made to follow, but the blue-eyed prodigy stopped him with a gentle hand on the shoulder. "By the way, Ryuuzaki-sensei has your cousin in her office again."

Ryoma nodded to show he'd heard. Idly, he wondered how he'd be able to meet up with Nanako when afternoon practices stopped. They'd have to work something out.

"You need a distraction?" the senior asked, tilting his head towards the freshmen trio currently heading towards them, no doubt intending to share their usual post-match congratulations.

Shaking his head, he ambled towards the clubhouse to change, ignoring his classmates. Practice was almost over anyway, and he didn't want to keep his cousin waiting for too long. It was useful to have his senpai running interference, but there was no need in this instance.

Still... his face threatened to break into a smirk at the memory of Horio's rather vocal confusion when Tezuka made all of the regulars except Ryoma run laps after that whole debacle with the Coach. They deserved it, too, for putting he and the captain through that sort of stress. Ryoma hadn't wanted them to find out in the first place,

and then when the inevitable had occurred, they'd nearly messed everything up for him! All of those nights spent in the park and clubhouse sleepless and hungry would have been for nothing if he'd then been sent away because they couldn't keep their gossiping to a whisper.

Although... he didn't know what he'd been so worried about anymore. It was sort of embarrassing having all of his senpai coddling him, but his anxiety over their finding out seemed a bit... stupid, now. For all the embarrassment, the weight off his shoulders more than made up for it. Tezuka had been right all along, though that came as no real surprise.

In any case, Nanako was waiting. Ryoma shrugged his regular's jersey on - there was no real need to shower, as he hadn't worked up much of a sweat in the cooler weather - and promptly headed towards the Coach's office.

He needn't have rushed. His cousin and Coach Ryuuzaki were sitting down having a nice chat over a cup of a tea.

"Ryoma!" she greeted with a smile.

"It was nice talking to you, Nanako. I'll give you two some privacy," Ryuuzaki said, standing. "Have to go make sure those freshmen clean up properly today. The storage area was a mess when I last looked!" The first-year barely stifled a choked cough at that.

His cousin was on it in an instant. "Are you okay? You're not coming down with a cold, are you? It is the season for it." A hand felt its way to his forehead.

Rolling his eyes, Ryoma slumped into the seat Ryuuzaki had left. "M'fine." He'd managed to fight off enough impending colds over the past couple of months already - the chances of getting sick now were comparatively slim. Best to distract Nanako, though, so she didn't start getting all motherly on him. He got more than enough of that from Tezuka and Oishi these days. "What's been happening?"

"I was going to ask you," she said in a hushed voice. "Ryoga came storming in a yesterday and started arguing with your father. They were being so loud! What happened? He mentioned that he'd talked to you, and that you'd been staying in a *park* ?"

Ryoma winced, mentally cursing Ryoga for his loose tongue. "Only for a couple of nights, before Buchou took me in."

"But a *park* !" She was visibly worked up about it. "You didn't say anything about that!"

"Wasn't important." He needed to get her off that topic quickly. "So what happened?"

She sighed, shaking her head. "I'm not sure. Your brother was rather angry, though - I don't think I'd ever seen him like that before. He came to me to ask for help writing a resume this morning, too," she confided. "Did you know he'd been working for a conman before?!"

He nodded. "Yeah, on that cruise ship."

She sniffed. "It's no wonder he's been lounging around the house so much. No one respectable would hire him with that sort of working history. I helped him fix it up. He mentioned that he really wanted to get another job so he could move out. I think he wants for you to be able to move back in." The last part was added softly.

Ryoma stiffened, then shifted uncomfortably. Eventually, he stated, "I don't think that's really possible anymore." He'd sworn that he would never play his father in tennis again. Even if Ryoga left and he was allowed to come home by default... after confronting that understanding of his father, could he do it? And wouldn't his father just throw him out all over again if he refused to play tennis with him?

At least he knew where Ryoga was coming from now. He was somewhat pleased that his initial assessment of his brother hadn't been completely off base. It really had been something as simple as Ryoga being unable to get a job, and figuring that he was old enough

to handle the consequences of losing the match. His brother's anger on his behalf after discovering that Ryoma hadn't received the same treatment went a lot way to soothing his bubbling resentment. It was almost a shame that he wouldn't get to play Ryoga again. Maybe he'd make an exception for a private match just between the two of them one day.

Nanako, for her part, just nodded sadly, then perked up. "Oh, almost forgot! I have some more money for you!"

Ryoma gaped. "More? You just gave me some last week!"

She proffered the envelope with a winning smile. "Go on, take it. I checked your cupboard for some more winter clothes, but you'll have outgrown them all by now."

Ryoma accepted the envelope a little reluctantly. He was going to acquire a hoard of money at this rate - his paranoia had him reluctant to spend it even when most people would deem it necessary. "Where are you getting all this money, though? Isn't this difficult for you?" It would be horrible to think that Nanako was depriving herself for his sake.

"You underestimate your cousin! I've been ripping your father off for quite a bit of his money lately. Did you know that he's a compulsive gambler? The way I figure it, this money should be yours anyway."

Ryoma had to smirk at that, but it quickly turned into a frown. After a pensive silence, he finally whispered, "Why are you doing this? Why are you doing so much for me?"

"Because it's the right thing to do, silly!"

"We don't even know each other that well."

Her smile puckered a little at that, but it rebounded quickly enough. "Maybe we didn't... but I think we know each other a lot better now, wouldn't you say?"

That... maybe that was true. He certainly hadn't appreciated Nanako before. It was rather easy to take her presence for granted. But then she'd turned up at the courts, and worried about him when no one else from his family had... and then proceeded to alternate between being a saint to him and cheating his father at gambling.

"Thanks for the money," he mumbled, carefully pocketing the envelope. The 'for everything else, too' went unsaid.

Tezuka appeared at the door a couple of minutes later, and Nanako made to excuse herself. "I won't keep you any longer, then."

The captain stopped her, though. "Please, don't leave on my account. My parents were actually hoping to invite you over for dinner next weekend."

Ryoma was just as startled by the pronouncement as his cousin was. "Eh, but that is, I..." she stammered.

"You only ever get to see each other for a short time after practice currently, correct? My mother thought it would be a good opportunity for you to visit in a nicer environment. And this way, you can see where Ryoma is currently staying."

Nanako blushed, before demurely agreeing, "... That would be wonderful. Ryoma's told me a little about your parents, and I would love to meet them."

He handed her a folded piece of paper. "This is the address and phone number, if you don't already have it, and a potential date and time. If it doesn't suit you, please suggest another day that will."

She took the paper reverently, checking it briefly. "This will be fine. Please let your parents know for me." Ryoma didn't resist much when she gave him a quick hug, even though it was sort of embarrassing in front of Tezuka. "I'll drop by here again before then in any case. Thank you, Tezuka."

She left, and the captain suggested, "We should be going too."

Ryoma followed along quietly, not really sure what to make of it. It would be nice to meet up with Nanako outside of that somewhat awkward school setting, but how had Tezuka's parents known to invite her over? To the best of his recollection, his cousin was only ever mentioned in passing, and he doubted that the senior would have explained much to them behind his back - he was far too honest for that. For that matter, he'd never actually discussed his predicament with them - did they just figure things out of their own?

"No tennis today?"

"I have an exam tomorrow."

Ryoma merely grunted an acknowledgement, and wound up spending the rest of the afternoon curled up in the corner of Tezuka's room reading.

More surprises were in store for him that night, though. Tezuka's mother had finally conceded the duty of washing dishes to him several days ago, but that night she stopped him before he started. "Echizen, could we speak with you for a moment?" Ayana asked politely. "Kunimitsu will handle the dishes tonight."

Ryoma couldn't help tensing. It sounded serious. Had he done something wrong? They were smiling, so he didn't think it was anything bad... Or maybe they wanted him to explain things to them as well. Ryoma hoped not. He was tired of answering questions all the time. Tezuka didn't seem at all concerned, though, even flashing him a brief reassuring smile.

They settled in the lounge room. Kuniharu made to turn on the television - it looked like a reflex - but his wife slapped his hand away, and he adjusted himself, clearing his throat and sitting up straight.

Ryoma's stomach was practically tying itself in knots at this point, so it was fortunate that they didn't waste any time beating around the bush. "We've been giving some thought to your... situation... lately and we came to the conclusion that using the spare futon on the floor of Kunimitsu's room just won't do any longer," Ayana announced firmly.

Oh no, they wouldn't really... They had been so *nice*...

Kuniharu nodded his agreement. "That's why we thought it might be time to move you into my father's old bedroom."

They were going to - "What?"

"Well, it's empty now... We don't have a proper guest room for you to stay in, so you might as well use that one. It would certainly save a lot of trouble setting up the spare futon in Kunitmitsu's room every day," Kuniharu answered absently.

They were giving him his own room? He was stunned speechless, and didn't quite know how to react. There was something so... *permanent* about having his own room there. But...

"Your father's room, though..." he began, not entirely comfortable with the notion.

"Don't be getting any silly ideas," Ayana interrupted. "He'd not want to see that room going to waste over sentimentality."

Kuniharu fidgeted, and then added, "Unless you're worried about ghosts."

"Kuniharu!"

He broke into a grin. "Just kidding."

She rolled her eyes. "And here I was worrying about you." She patted his knee affectionately.

Ryoma cleared his throat, and managed in a small voice, "Just... um... thank you. I'd really... thank you." He couldn't manage much more than that. The generosity of all the people around him was actually getting pretty humbling.

Kuniharu clapped his hands together. "It's decided then. We'll move you in tomorrow."

"You can run along now, Echizen," Ayana offered. "Don't let us keep you."

Sketching out a deep bow - and whole-heartedly meaning it - he'd retreated from the living room and went to find Tezuka. He was already in his bedroom, packing his bag for the next day.

"Your parents are going to move me to your grandfather's room," Ryoma reported, still a little dazed.

"I am aware. They discussed it with me first, but wanted to ask you themselves." Tezuka frowned at his bag, rearranging several items to fit a particularly unwieldy book in.

"Your parents are rather cool."

"Are they?" The senior seemed genuinely surprised by the notion, as though he'd never even considered it before.

"Yes." They *still* hadn't pressed him for details on his situation, seeming content to pick up whatever little morsels slipped through regular conversation. No doubt when Nanako came over they'd get the full story then. Previously, he might have worried about it, but if they were going so far as to move him into a room...

"If you say so."

Awkwardly, Ryoma asked, "Are you sure it's really... I mean, your grandfather's..."

"He would want the room to be used. I think it would bother him to know it was going to waste," Tezuka answered.

"Hn. Your mother said something similar."

It went some way to soothing his reservations, but that night when they were both settling into bed, Ryoma still couldn't relax enough to sleep. Too much had happened over the past couple of days - between this, and Ryoga, and his personal epiphany regarding his father, resting felt impossible.

Tezuka must have heard him moving around, because after a few minutes he asked, "Having trouble sleeping?"

Scowling into the darkness, he admitted, "Yeah." Then... "You know, Buchou... this might be the last night we share a room like this."

"Hm."

"I'm sort of going to miss it."

The, "Hm," was slightly more contemplative this time.

After a few more minutes of him tossing and turning, Tezuka asked, "How did you used to get to sleep?"

What sort of question was that? "What?"

"Before."

"You mean at the clubhouse? I didn't really. I only ever got to sleep when I was too tired to notice anything else." He didn't see the relevance of the question.

"No, I meant before that."

Oh. Ryoma thought hard about it. The answer felt a bit like a knife twist in the gut, though. "... Karupin."

"Your cat?"

He nodded, before remembering that Tezuka wouldn't be able to see him in the darkness. "Yeah. He'd usually sleep curled up next to me. I'd listen to him breathing, and-" His voice hitched, and he mentally cursed. He kept trying to avoid thinking about Kaurpin, because his cat was honestly one of the things he'd missed the most. At least he knew Nanako was taking good care of him.

There was a rustle of bedcovers, then Tezuka ordered. "Come here."

"Eh?"

"Hurry up, it's cold."

Confused, Ryoma threw back his own blankets and felt his way to the bed. Once there, Tezuka pulled him in, flinging the blankets back over him and pulling him into a loose hug.

"... Buchou?"

"I'm not quite Karupin, but it might help. Just this once," he explained with a yawn.

Ryoma didn't have any response to that. He just burrowed deeper under the covers. Tezuka was warm, and he could feel the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest with each breath. Soon, he found himself unconsciously matching that rhythm, eyes slowly closing as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 28

Author's Note: The end, hurray! I'm quite sure the ending will leave many people dissatisfied, as I took a few cues from Konomi and not all the loose ends are tied up - I deliberately neglected Rinko, for example (seeing as she is also terribly neglected in the anime). I really wasn't very happy with this fic overall, but it appears to have garnered a reaction from some of you and if people are still reading at this point you must have enjoyed it at least a little, so that's good.

Thanks very much for reading, and especially for all the reviews. I'd like to thank everyone by name, but that would take much too long. And no, there won't be a sequel. I'd rather move on to new fics. ;)

The Dispossession of Echizen Ryoma

By Sinnatious

Chapter 28

Tezuka absently brushed a snowflake from his coat. The snow probably wouldn't stick, but the weak flurries signalled the official end of tennis for the season. Fortunately, Ryoma's part-time job was at a partly indoor complex, so they could still play fairly regularly and keep their skills honed during the off-season. It was an unexpected boon from a job the freshman admitted to taking in desperation; indoor facilities were usually rather expensive and difficult to book, but for an employee it was both cheaper and substantially easier to secure time.

Ryoma was picking up some extra classes now, too, after his employers witnessed a practice session between them and realised exactly what sort of player they'd unwittingly hired for a children's class.

Things had been working out rather well lately. After Ryoma settled into his own room he seemed a lot calmer and integrated better with the household. He still had a tendency to do his homework in Tezuka's room and take on as many chores as Ayana would allow in some sort of attempt at compensation for food and board, but it appeared that the last vestiges of his insecurities had finally been chased away. Nanako had explained a few of the more delicate points of Ryoma's situation to his parents when she'd come over for dinner, and they both took it as an invitation to make the first-year part of the family in everything except the most official of capacities.

Something still felt unfinished to Tezuka, though. The matter of Echizen Nanjiroh continued to bother him.

After they'd encountered Ryoga, something had changed; that much was obvious. There was a sort of disappointment in Ryoma's eyes whenever the other man was mentioned.

Tezuka, for his part, couldn't quite come to grips with it. There had to be more to it than tennis. Which was why he was currently standing outside the Echizen residence, hesitant to act despite making the decision days ago.

Ryoma wouldn't go, not even when he asked, claiming that there was no need and that he understood now. Tezuka didn't really believe him, but he couldn't blame him. If his own parents had thrown him out, for whatever reason, he couldn't imagine wanting to see them again. Not after such a betrayal of trust. And Ryoma wasn't exactly an open and trusting person in the first place. Echizen Nanjiroh - someone he once considered a hero - had left a permanent emotional scar on his team mate, his rival, his friend.

Tezuka *had* to know though. He had to hear it from the horse's mouth, even if Ryoma didn't need to.

Hesitantly, he knocked on the front door, but there was no response. It appeared that neither Nanako nor Ryoga were at home; this was sort of a relief.

Should he leave and try again later?

Ryoma had mentioned before that there was a tennis court of sorts out the back. A look wouldn't hurt. Just in case. After all, he doubted that he would get up the nerve to come again, and the opportunities to do so were limited almost entirely to the times when the freshman was working.

His curiosity paid off. On the back porch a man dressed in black monk robes was resting in front of a heater, reading what looked to be some sort of magazine and chuckling to himself. Tezuka cleared his throat.

It took the man a minute or so to register his presence and look up, during which time Tezuka had realised exactly what sort of magazine was being read, and was fighting down a blush. "Eh, who're you? Wait, you look familiar..." The man peered at him for a long moment, then sat up, exclaiming, "Hey! It's the kid-captain!"

Tezuka had never actually met Echizen Nanjiroh in person. He'd seen him on television when he was younger, as well as in magazines, but all of those images were rather out of date.

He was not impressed by the image before him now.

The slovenly appearance, the stubble, the exhibited laziness, and not to mention the *porn magazine*... he'd heard both Ryoma and Ryuuzaki speak derogatorily of him before, but Tezuka had not truly understood until meeting the man for himself.

"Echizen Nanjiroh?" he asked, just to be sure. It was hard to reconcile this man with the image of a once-great tennis player.

"Who else would I be? What do you want? Here for a match? You'll have to wait until it stops snowing."

"No. I'm here to talk about your son."

At that, the man rolled his eyes and settled back on to his elbows. "You too? Ryoga's been on my case constantly lately. And sweet little Nanako has been so cold to me!" The last part was exclaimed in what the senior hoped was mock dramatism.

His cavalier attitude towards the issue was rather unsettling. Thus, Tezuka sought to cut straight to the point. "I want to know why."

"Why?"

"Yes. Why you set up that competition between your sons. Why you threw Ryoma out."

The question seemed to genuinely puzzle the other man. "Isn't it obvious? It's for the tennis, of course."

When Tezuka just stared at him, he laughed. "What else did you think it would be?"

He didn't know what he'd been expecting. Ryoma had said that it was for the tennis - that knowing his father, it wouldn't be anything else - but a part of him couldn't believe it.

"It was just for the tennis," Tezuka repeated woodenly.

Echizen Nanjiroh shrugged, then leaned forward abruptly, a fire burning in his eyes. "You understand it, don't you? You'd have to, if you managed to beat the boy so many times. To be the best, to go to the top, you have to want it more than anything else. You need special motivation. You have to suffer for your craft. Like artists."

Was it true? Had it really been...

When he remained silent, Nanjiroh elaborated, waving his hand about airily. "Those kids, you know... they've got it in them. But they didn't have the motivation. They needed rivalry. I'm too far ahead for them to really consider me. It doesn't mean anything if I defeat them day after day, you know? It was better that they play off each other."

"To go that far, though..." Tezuka stated, voice strained. "Anything could have happened to Ryoma. He was sleeping in a park. He was going hungry. He-"... Nearly turned himself into a prostitute, but the captain didn't think he could bring himself to say that when the man seemed so uncaring. In fact, his expression was almost delighted.

"Exactly! You see, right? He's become stronger, hasn't he?"

Tezuka's mouth went dry. It was true. Ryoma had become stronger; he'd practiced even more fervently recently than during the lead up to the Nationals. His game had come leaps and bounds in the past few months. Tezuka did not doubt that the freshman, if he really wanted to, could go pro at any time.

He couldn't bring himself to answer, and Nanjiroh finally seemed to register the disapproval on the senior's face. Frowning, he flopped back down, and picked up his magazine again. "Che, should have known. You kids just don't get it."

There were so many things Tezuka wanted to say to that. He *did* understand. He really did. He was just horrified. Disillusioned. It had rocked his faith that an adult could be so blind, so childish, so narrow-minded as to not fully understand the consequences of his actions.

He was a man obsessed with tennis, a man who had given it up with noble intentions before he was really prepared to. Echizen Nanjiroh had become bitter, he realised, at departing from his tennis career so early. It probably seemed a fanciful, wonderful notion at the time; raising a rival who would be better than himself, sacrificing his own love of competing for the good of his newborn son... but the honeymoon had evidently worn off at some point. And for someone so obsessed with the sport to suddenly realise that he'd spent his best years teaching a small child to play a game with a racket too large for him, and another son who seemed to enjoy tennis but possessed no real ambition for it... of course there would be resentment.

It was starting to take shape in Tezuka's mind. Frustrated and impatient - regardless of the fact that he was expecting too much from two children, prodigies though they might have been - Echizen Nanjiroh had obviously constructed a competition between the brothers in order to ignite the ambition that he perceived to be lacking. Tezuka could just imagine a younger, carefree Ryoga not caring about it in the slightest, so of course then Nanjiroh would find some way to up the stakes to the point where Ryoga would have *no choice* but to care.

Were he patient enough to wait several more years, to the point where Ryoma actually had a chance, it might have worked. But Ryoga was responsible enough of a big brother to take the fall and throw the match. And then when his father hadn't changed his tune the next year, Ryoga ran off for good, refusing to be dragged into that sort of future. And so Nanjiroh had been left to pin all his hopes on Ryoma.

Ryoma was good. He easily had the potential to become the best, but Tezuka had seen that when he'd come to Seigaku, he'd been lacking any real love of the sport, and lacking any real motivation to play. He'd thought it a shame, and tried to coax a fire out of the young regular. Apparently he'd been successful, but at some point Ryoma started caring more about the team and his friends than his tennis career. After all, the young regular that once would have left the club with nary a backwards glance tried to turn down an invitation to the American Open just so he could go with them to the National Tournament.

That must have upset the sports legend, reminding him once again of how his children, who had the love of tennis instilled in them as though by genetic right, weren't moving fast enough despite all he'd sacrificed for them. Then by chance Ryoga returned - finding himself adrift and at a loss after the debacle on the cruise ship. And Nanjiroh saw an opportunity to correct where he'd gone wrong. He'd obviously thought that he'd been too soft on Ryoga, and that his son hadn't been given enough motivation yet to want to win in tennis if throwing

the match was still considered an option. And so the competition was brought back. Only this time, he figured, he really would leave his child out in the cold. There would be no hand holding through the ordeal, no phone calls, no drives to friends' houses, no bank accounts.

Tezuka wondered whether the man was even aware of how warped his thinking had become over time. It was enthusiasm, really, coupled with a subconscious resentment over the fact that he'd given up the prime years of his tennis career and ceasing his climb before he was honestly ready to.

That left only Echizen Rinko, a woman who must have been so blinded by love for her husband that she allowed herself to be convinced by his twisted logic.

"Is there anything else you want?" Nanjiroh yawned, sounding irritable now.

Tezuka shook his head. There was no more point to talking.

"Then leave me to my beauties in peace! Oh ho, what have we here?" he chuckled, flipping to the next page.

The senior retreated quietly. He'd got what he'd come for. Yet...

He had hoped, he realised, that there *was* more to it than tennis. Had believed it. Because if tennis was all it was... then both Ryoma and Ryoga had nothing more to them in their father's eyes. It made the concept of family so shallow. It was an injustice to them. Ryoma was so much more than tennis. And there was so much more to tennis than simply being the best.

Should he tell the freshman what he'd learned? Was there even a point? He'd seen Ryoma's discomfiture when asked about it in Ryuuzaki's office, and then after the chance encounter with Ryoga... a sort of sad acceptance.

Ryoma already knew.

It made his declaration of revenge all the more chilling. Tezuka thought it a fitting punishment, and so had wholeheartedly agreed, but perhaps it was only now that he fully comprehended what it meant.

He didn't care. Echizen Nanjiroh deserved it. If he didn't understand the depth of what he'd done in the name of the sport, perhaps such a punishment would open his eyes to it.

The journey home was spent feeling somewhat ill.

Ryoma met him on the corner two blocks from his house, bundled up in a jacket two sizes too large for him.

"Buchou! Where have you been?"

He raised his hand in greeting. "Nowhere special. Would you like to play some tennis?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Ryoma responded eagerly, and held out his bag. "I brought your racket. The court's already booked. Oishi and Kikumaru want to come, though."

"Doubles?" he asked in disbelief.

"Che, of course not. They can just watch."

Tezuka laughed. Ryoma started at the sound, giving him a sort of amazed expression. "So Buchou *can* laugh."

He smiled indulgently. "Don't tell anyone you heard that."

Things would be okay. There was so much more to them than tennis, after all.

Thanks for reading.